

Trinity Sunday – John 3:1-17
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Sedona Arizona

“Praise to the holy and undivided Trinity, one God: as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen.” This is the doxology used in *Enriching Our Worship*, a book of supplemental liturgical materials offered to assist worshipping communities in the Episcopal Church in expanding the language, images and metaphors used in worship. “Expanding our vocabulary of prayer and the ways in which we name the Holy One bear witness to the fact that the mystery of God transcends all categories of knowing,”¹ including those of specific gender pronouns. Here at St. Andrew's we use the eucharistic liturgies from *Enriching our Worship* during our Saturday evening Taizé services. In these liturgies, we address God as “Holy and living One,” “God of all mercy,” “Holy and gracious God,” or Holy One of Blessing.” Jesus and the Holy Spirit are also named in the prayers; always in relationship to the other persons of the Trinity.

Personally, I find most of this inclusive and expansive language to be enriching and inspiring. But praying to the “holy and undivided Trinity, one God” sounds rather sterile and formulaic; like the language was chosen to align perfectly with ecclesiastical arguments so as to avoid being burned at the stake for heresy. Praying those words do not spark my imagination about who God is, nor do they inspire me to develop a deeper relationship with God. Although we don't expect to grasp the fullness of the Divine One on this side of the grave, we do hope to express our wonder and gratitude through languages that celebrate the mystery we experience when encountering the presence of our loving and merciful God.

¹ *Enriching Our Worship 1: Supplemental Liturgical Materials prepared by The Standing Liturgical Commission 1997.* New York, NY: Church Publishing, Inc. (1998), 5.

Languages of words, music, art, and dance, as well as languages of diversity in culture and reciprocity in nature.

Today, the Church celebrates Trinity Sunday by attempting to focus on a theological concept that is difficult to explain and understand. Thankfully the appointed lectionary readings attempt to enlighten worshippers not with long-winded doctrinal statements and tedious concepts, but by sharing stories about how our spiritual ancestors have experienced the holy presence of God. God is described as powerful and empowering; mighty and merciful; challenging and gracious. Although these observations are partial and incomplete, we are blessed to glimpse even a small trace of God's glory.

Scripture is filled with ordinary people being encountered by God because God is always seeking to be in deeper relationship with God's people. Even when we discern God's presence, it is God who first reaches out to us. God reveals Godself to us in a myriad of ways, and always with the intention of drawing us closer in loving relationship with God, humanity, and all other aspects of God's creation.

In today's Gospel reading, we heard how Nicodemus encountered Jesus in the darkness of night. Nicodemus was a prominent religious leader who experienced the presence of God in Jesus. He appears to have sought out Jesus of his own accord, but this nocturnal meeting was also the work of the Holy Spirit. God was reaching out to Nicodemus in multiple ways, trying to catch his attention, and inspire a response that would be so transformative that his life and the lives of others would be expressions of God's abiding love for the world.

Nicodemus and his colleagues had witnessed Jesus perform many signs during this early stage of his ministry; signs that indicated to them that Jesus was a holy man of God. But Jesus did not speak or act like the Pharisees.

Authority, credentials, and honor had not been publicly conferred upon him by any powerful officials. And yet, Jesus was clearly a teacher from God. Nicodemus wanted to know more about who Jesus was, but speaking respectfully to this new teacher during the light of day would risk his prestigious position in the community. Did Nicodemus actually believe that a secret meeting with Jesus would answer all his questions? Did he actually think that he could encounter Jesus and not be changed forever? Apparently Nicodemus approached Jesus more with his head than his heart. He seemed to want only the facts and was expecting answers to fit into preconceived ideas about who God is, what God does, and what God's hopes are for God's people. Instead Jesus offered a teaching that challenged Nicodemus to the very core of his being. He invited Nicodemus to begin his life anew. This was such an unexpected answer, that Nicodemus defaulted to a literal interpretation of being born again. But Jesus encouraged Nicodemus to see and experience the kingdom of God in the present moment by being reborn from above through the Spirit. If Nicodemus hadn't so worried about his reputation, he might have recognized that the Spirit was already working in and through him to draw him closer to God -- the God of the Scriptures who is the same God in Jesus; and same God the Holy Spirit who continually breathes new life into all creation.

Nicodemus will come to accept Jesus as his Lord and savior not in one single moment of ecstatic public testimony. Gradually Nicodemus will develop an enduring relationship with Jesus that will extend at least through the remainder of his earthly life. But his journey will not be without struggle, risk, and pain. Nicodemus will openly defend Jesus' right to a fair hearing before his colleagues in the Sanhedrin, yet during Jesus' arrest and crucifixion, he will remain silent. After Jesus dies Nicodemus will be remembered for assisting Joseph of Arimathea in

preparing Jesus' body for burial. Nicodemus will eventually be able to testify that he has seen and heard, touched and smelled God in Jesus.

These intimate experiences of God are what we desire in our weekly worship services and in our daily lives. We hope that our hearts and imaginations will be opened by the Spirit to receive the gifts of God not just through our private conversations with Jesus, but more fully in our relationships with each other, and the more than human world. God reaches out to us in love in a myriad of ways that we may perceive God at work in and through our relationships with all of God's good creation. The kingdom of God, the heart of God, the aroma of God is already in our midst ready to be experienced in communion with all creation, with deep joy and gratitude.

In her book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Potawatomi author and botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer shares her learnings and experiences of deep relationship and interconnectedness through themes of reciprocity found in nature and in many indigenous cultures. She lovingly intertwines stories of Native American traditions and Western scientific traditions by focusing on intimate relationships between land and humans; between the natural world and the cultural world. The Creator is honored when our relationship with the land is honored, along with all that springs forth from the earth, sea, and sky. She writes:

“I offer. . .a braid of stories meant to heal our relationship with the world.

The braid is woven from three strands: indigenous ways of knowing, scientific knowledge, and the story of an Ani-shina-bekwe scientist trying to bring them together in service to what matters most. It is an intertwining of science, spirit and story—old stories and new ones that can be medicine for our broken relationship with earth, a pharmacopoeia of healing stories that

allow us to imagine a different relationship, in which people and land are good medicine for each other”²

In the traditional practice of braiding sweetgrass relationships are bound together through culture, language, and spirituality. “A sheaf of sweetgrass, bound at the end and divided into thirds, is ready to braid.”³ One person holds the ends while another gently pulls, “all the while leaning in, head to head, chatting and laughing, watching each other’s hands, one holding steady while the other shifts the slim bundles over another, each in its turn. Linked by sweetgrass, there is reciprocity between you, linked by sweetgrass, the holder is as vital as the braider.”⁴ There is an “intimate relationship of dependance and belonging and trust.”⁵ It is not unlike the life of the Trinity, that is the life of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, intertwining with the life of the earth and all forms of life. We receive the gifts of God and become bearers of these gifts by braiding stands of love, care, and mutuality into our relationships with all that is.⁶ Together we join in the difficult transformational work of healing our broken relationships with the world, and in the celebratory dance of God’s eternal love for the world.⁷

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² Robin Wall Kimmerer. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions (2013), x.

³ Ibid, ix.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Karoline Lewis. Sermon Brainwave #786 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgGWm6BkYKk>

⁶ Cláudio Carvalhaes. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/seventh-sunday-of-easter-2/commentary-on-john-176-19-5>

⁷ Amy Butler. A Sermon for Every Sunday B27, 2018. <https://asermonforeverysunday.com>