

“The Design of Wisdom”

Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

Psalm 8; Proverbs 8:1-4,22-31; Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15

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Trinity Sunday

Christmas – Jesus arrives; Epiphany – the Magi arrive; Palm Sunday – Jesus parades; Good Friday – Jesus is crucified; Easter – Jesus is raised; Pentecost – Spirit arrives; Trinity Sunday – ?

Today is Trinity Sunday. What happened on Trinity Sunday? Of those other days we mark in our Christian year, there is a biblical connection. Trinity has no connecting event. In fact, the Trinity is not named in the Bible. Lectionary texts for Trinity Sunday only obliquely guide us to understand what is considered a central belief of Christian faith.

The traditional formulation of the Trinity was initially set forth in the early creeds of the church as an entry to church membership: I believe in God the Father, God the Son, God the Spirit. “Holy, Holy, Holy” is our familiar Trinitarian hymn, with its refrain of “God in three persons, blessed Trinity.” The three persona or essences of God were formalized in the Nicene Creed in 325AD:

“We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made.”

The Nicene Creed then connects the third person of the Trinity with the first two in this way:

“We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son.”

In preparing for this Trinity Sunday, I was drawn to this year’s lectionary reading in the Book of Proverbs, one of the wisdom books of the Hebrew Scriptures. I approach Proverbs as lessons taught to male children of the rich. Much of the book includes instruction focused on the ethics of being fair, trustworthy, generous to the poor, and a good husband and father. We use phrases sourced from verses in Proverbs: “Spare the rod and spoil the child,” (Proverbs 13:24). “Without vision, the people perish,” (Proverbs 29:18).

Within Proverbs, the persona of Wisdom is introduced, as a woman whose teachings the wise will follow. In our reading in chapter 8, Wisdom is contrasted with another woman – the “loose” woman of the previous chapter – who seeks to entice and seduce the weak of heart and character onto paths of ruin.

Proverbs 7 could rival a romance novel with the “loose” woman’s invitation to come lounge on her couch covered with Egyptian linens and sensuous fragrances. FYI: Proverbs 7 does not appear in the lectionary, so don’t hold your breath on hearing a “loose woman” sermon from this lectionary-based preacher.

In the first four verses of our reading, Wisdom is introduced in contrast to the loose woman. Then, Wisdom herself will tell how and when and why she was created.

Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice? ²On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; ³beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out: ⁴“To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live.

²²*The Lord created me at the beginning of the work of creation, the first of the acts of long ago.* ²³*Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth.*

²⁴*When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water.* ²⁵*Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth—* ²⁶*when God had not yet made earth and fields, or the world's first bits of soil.*

²⁷*When God established the heavens, I was there, when God drew a circle on the face of the deep,* ²⁸*when God made firm the skies above, established the fountains of the deep,* ²⁹*and assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress God's command, when God marked out the foundations of the earth,* ³⁰*then I was beside God, like a master worker; and I was daily God's delight, rejoicing before God always,* ³¹*rejoicing in the inhabited world and delighting in the human race.*

In our Gospel reading, Jesus speaks of the Spirit of truth, the one who can make clear what his disciples are not yet ready or able to understand. He shares this knowing they are still trying to process the fact he has told them he will die. John 16:12-15.

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³*When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.* ¹⁴*He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you.* ¹⁵*All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.*

In the traditional Trinitarian formulation, God is Father, and Jesus is Son, and then we have the Holy Spirit, the arrival of which is described in Acts as fire, but which is often depicted as a descending dove.

In her book, Circle of Quiet, Madeleine L'Engle repeats Dorothy Sayers' story of a man who is seeking to understand a Christian trying to explain the Trinity, using the image of Spirit as descending dove. The man expresses his puzzlement.

"Honorable Father, is very good.

Honorable Son, is very good.

Honorable Bird I do not understand at all."

"Madeleine L'Engle observes, "Very few of us understand 'Honorable Bird,' except to acknowledge that without this power and grace [of the Spirit] nothing would be written, painted, or composed at all. To say anything beyond this about the creative process is like pulling all the petals off a flower in order to analyze it, and ending up having destroyed the flower." [as read in: <http://day1.org/4759-what-kind-of-math-is-this>]

The danger of Trinity Sunday is we seek to logically prove the Trinity, and destroy its mystery and wonder. Even so, I, at least, welcome images that seek to grasp the organic relationship of the three persons of the trinity.

A seminary classmate once shared how an elder in his church had depicted the Trinity in terms of an electric power station, and if my memory is correct she suggested God generated the power, Jesus transmitted it, and the Spirit is what humans plug into to receive it. Others offer simpler images, such as a shamrock or clover, with three leaves, but connected to the same plant; I will admit I have never heard of the three shiny leaves of poison ivy used for the Trinity. I like the image of a blooming flower – God is the roots, Jesus is the visible plant, and the Spirit is the unseen fragrance emanating from the bloom – one plant, three essences.

Our Gospel reading seems to parallel this flower image, as Jesus says, “All the Father has is mine...and the Spirit of truth will come and take what is mine and declare it to you.” From God, to Jesus, carried to us by the Spirit – one message for us, expressed in three essences.

Our lesson in Proverbs seems to add a fourth dimension to the Trinitarian mix, the persona of Wisdom. Again, she is described as having been around since the beginning of God-time. Some suggest she is portrayed on the ceiling of the Vatican’s Sistine Chapel. In Michaelangelo’s familiar Creation mural, my focus is usually drawn to the nearly touching finger tips of the extended arms of God in heaven and the human on earth; yet, an often-missed part of the mural reveals a woman embraced by and watching from the crook of the unextended left arm of God. Some suggest this could be not-yet-created Eve; others believe the artist was depicting Mary, the mother of Jesus. Yet, early on there has been the thought the woman was Wisdom, there with God at Creation.

In Proverbs, Wisdom is there before God declared the first day to be good. Wisdom calls herself God’s master worker, perhaps something like an architect who creates a design from God’s ideas. In a very real sense, we are invited to explore all of creation for the fingerprint of the designer.

When we lived in Pennsylvania, we were just an hour from Fallingwater, a Frank Lloyd Wright house. We would often take visitors to visit, and have been to others of his prairie style houses. One begins to learn and recognize Wright’s design. Just so, those with trained eyes may be able to tell the artist of a painting by style of brushstroke, composition and color. Those with trained ears may identify the composer of a symphony or writer of a song not just by its familiarity, but by its style, meter, or lyrics. Architects, artists, musicians often leave unseen fingerprints on their work.

I find our lesson in Proverbs inviting us to find the fingerprints of Wisdom’s design within the wonders of creation. Both the loose woman of Proverbs 7, and Wisdom in Proverbs 8, stand on the corner, though their invitations are quite different. Wisdom invites us to see God’s wonder. As one writer suggests, “On the road of life there are innumerable occasions for us to stand at the corner of Mystery and Mundane and see God at work in the course of an ordinary day. The beauty of the Divine Trinity is embedded in every moment of our lives, could we but see; and to see, we have only to look.” [Steve Shusett, *Hungry Hearts*, Spring 2007, read in Feasting on the Word Year C, Volume 3, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) p. 30.]

“Seeing is believing” is a common phrase, rooted in, “If I see it, I will believe it.” Yet, “believing is seeing,” opens us to mystery and wonder. “I see because I believe.” If one believes there is wonder to be found, one will find it. If one believes in the mystery of the Trinity, one will discover the intricacies of its three essences, the creative nature of God, the forgiving and redeeming nature of Jesus, and the guiding, sustaining, courage-giving nature of the Spirit.

Beyond the wonder of the beauty of a flower or sunset, the intricacy of a spider's web, or the complexity of the human body, we also ponder and search for the Spirit of truth of which Jesus speaks to his disciples. What Wisdom reminds us is truth is implanted by God, and thus revealed to us, in the public places of creation. Wisdom's truth is woven within, and revealed by the physical and natural sciences, as well as in the creativity of music, drama, dance, and visual arts. The teachings revealed in Scripture are complemented by their expressions in hymn and ballad, painting and poem. As such, we have a weaving of Wisdom and truth.

In the last two verses of our reading, Wisdom says, ³⁰*then I was beside God, like a master worker; and I was daily God's delight, rejoicing before God always,* ³¹*rejoicing in the inhabited world and delighting in the human race.*

No, there was no event that caused us to have a Trinity Sunday, yet we mark it to celebrate the divine invitation to discover and recognize delight. On Trinity Sunday, we are reminded that God in three persons is not out there, standing apart from us, but here, standing with us and within us, delighting in us, and hoping we will find delight in one another. In a very real sense, we thus become a part of the woven design of Wisdom, and if we believe, we begin to notice and marvel at the creative, at the redemptive and at the sustaining essences of our God, in three persons, blessed Trinity.