

Sermon

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St. John the Evangelist

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

I was having a conversation with a parishioner last week, and towards the end of our time together, she said something along the lines of “I’ve always thought that when all was said and done what you believed wouldn’t matter as much as what kind of person you were; what you did with your life.” I agree with her, and I said as much in our conversation. Many people, many famous Christians and theologians have said similar things. A good person, regardless of religion, will have less to answer for in the end than a bad person who may very well be a loyal church-goer.

But I’d like to refine my answer a bit, because I think the relationship between right belief (*orthodoxy*) and right practice (*orthopraxis*) warrants a more subtle understanding than I let on to in this conversation and I think it would be worthwhile for all of us to be clear on it. Now, I don’t want this parishioner to feel as though I am arguing with her because, like I said, I agree with what she said. But I am a bit concerned because more and more it seems, from conversations I have had with people around here, and around the Episcopal Church more broadly, people are less concerned with doctrinal statements, and more concerned with action. You may be one of them. I want to make sure we don’t think we can just disregard our statements of belief as being unimportant, or even *less* important than the life one leads.

One of the things I hear when people seek to prioritize practices over beliefs is echoes of a frustration from being told you just had to believe certain things and then you would be “right” or “saved” or a Christian. The way those beliefs shaped your life was less important than getting them correct. And I would share a similar frustration with such empty understandings of what it means to believe something. Because the word “believe” originally meant, something more akin to “to hold dear” (WC Smith). To believe something was to love it, to cherish it. Now I could say, “I love you” to Melinda all day long, but if I never did the dishes after she cooked dinner, or never bought her a present on her birthday my words would be empty statements; the right thing to say, but with no substance to back it up. So just as to love a person is not just to *say* it but to *do* things that show it, to believe something means, or at least it’s supposed to mean, allowing that belief to shape your life, your actions. When we separate these two things, belief and practice, we are already on the wrong track.

What I also hear when people try to downplay the importance of statements of belief is a frustration that doctrine has become the point of division and discord in religion. And historically this is, sadly, very much the case. And while I lament the way that theology is often the thing which divides us, rather than the thing which unites us, I’m not ready sublimate the claims on the nature of God as revealed in the Bible, the world and the teachings of the Church to being less important than being a good person, because (and this is the nuance I want to add to my answer to anonymous parishioner number 1) having a set of beliefs to subscribe to helps shape the kind of person you are. They are inextricably

intertwined. There would be no definition of “good” if we did not have the golden rule. And there would be no clarity to “love your neighbor” if we did not have Jesus to model it. Statements of belief make us accountable, they give our lives definition, by seeking to reveal to us something essential about the nature of God.

Take the doctrine of the Trinity, for example. Today is marked in the church as Trinity Sunday; the day we celebrate the majesty and mystery of the triune God—that is one God in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. There’s a joke that this is the day when all over the church Curate’s or seminarians get to preach because they are the one’s closest to learning about all the complicated formulations theologians have conjured to explain this enigmatic doctrine. It’s only half a joke. For the doctrine of the Trinity is one over which much ink and blood has been spilled, and it remains virtually impossible to understand.

But even if we can’t quite make full sense of the 3=1 formulation, there are some important things that we can learn about the nature of God from the doctrine of the Trinity that can and should impact the good lives we are so keen to live.

First of all we need to understand that part of the value of the doctrine of the Trinity is that it reveals to us the limits of our understanding of God. To say God exists in three persons is to say that we are sure that God has acted in these three manifestations—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—but we don’t exactly know how, because that knowledge is, as the Psalmist might say, too wonderful to us (Psalm 139). God is more than we can ever fully know or explain, and the Trinity teaches us that.

The Trinity also tells us that God’s work is inherently creative and giving. God cannot help but share, move out from Godself. Our One God overflowed into the natural creation becoming what we might call, it’s Father; that same God gave of Godself in flesh and blood, in Jesus Christ, the Son, and God continues to pour God’s “love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit,” as Paul says in his letter to the Romans this morning. God is generative. God expands, reaches out, gives. God is in relationship with the world in these various ways, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the Trinity.

And what the Trinity also shows us, is that the nature of this relationship, this connection between God and the world, is one of love. Love is the tie that binds Father to Son to Holy Spirit. The current running through that divine triangle is mutual care and affection. God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, and his only begotten son so loved his disciples that he sent them the Holy Spirit to direct and guide them after he was gone. It’s not about order of place, or hierarchy or time in history, the Trinity is about connection, about caring relationship.

God as majestic mystery beyond our full comprehension. This humbles us. God as generative, giving and creative. This calls us out of ourselves. God as connected to Godself and to us through love. This inspires and comforts us. These are but three things that should impact the life you live if you believe in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. There’s more to glean here, for sure, but what I hope is becoming clear is that theology matters because a doctrine like this tells us things about God that, if we believe in them, if we hold them dear, will instruct our life, commit us to behavior that is in keeping with God. If we believe that the force that created us, abides in us and works through us, is a force whose nature is caring connection, then that’s what we will be shaped to be. The

Trinity is not the only place to get this message, but it reinforces it and makes it central to our understanding of God which in turn, makes it central to our life.

So anonymous parishioner if you're out there, thank you. You are right. But also, allow me to rephrase my answer to you. Yes, the kind of person you are matters chiefly. But what you do with your life cannot be divorced from those things which you hold dear, which you hold to be true, hold to be sacred about God. Without attempts at explaining things like the Trinity, without the slavish labors of theologians and scholars, contentious and esoteric though they may be, we'd be completely in the dark. Instead, we have the candlelight of the creeds and other statements of faith to illumine our path. And through them we know something of the heartbeat of this universe, a heartbeat of generosity, connection and care. Through them we know God and *therefore* we know how to live. So that's why, as Christians, everything we do in life, we do in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; because that is what it means to believe. Amen.