

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ
Trinity Sunday- May 30, 2010

Scripture lessons: Psalm 8 & John 14:25-31, 16:12-15

OUR SHY GOD

Shyness is not a quality we usually associate with God. As the holy and almighty Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer of all things, what could God possibly have to be shy about? Yet on this Trinity Sunday when we especially celebrate God the Three-in-One, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, I think God's shyness is rightly our "thought for the day". For according to our Scriptures, in their relationships with each other the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are gloriously shy. What does that mean?

In an essay on the Trinity, New Testament scholar Frederick Dale Bruner writes, "One of the most surprising discoveries in my . . . study of the doctrine and experience of the (Holy) Spirit in the New Testament is what I can only express as the shyness of the Spirit. What I mean here by shyness is not the shyness of timidity, but the shyness of deference, the shyness of a concentrated centering of attention on another; it is not the shyness (such that we often experience) of self-centeredness, but the shyness of other-centeredness."

This example might help us see more of what Bruner means. I'm sure many of us remember Johnny Carson as the former, long-time host of The Tonight Show. I'm sure you also remember Ed McMahon as his sidekick. Each night before the show, Ed would warm up the audience for Johnny. When it came time for Johnny to appear, Ed would deliver his big line, "Heeeeeeeere's Johnny!"

Ed deferred to Johnny. He concentrated his attention on Johnny. He pointed other people's attention to Johnny. He was shy towards Johnny in a way similar to the way that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are shy towards each other.

Let's hear Jesus again in today's Scripture from the gospel of John. Jesus says, "But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. When the Advocate comes he will testify on my behalf. 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. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you." (14:26; 15:26; 16:8, 13f.)

Jesus says that the work of the Holy Spirit is not to shout, "Heeeeeeeere's the Spirit! It's not to say, "The Father and the Son have had their time in the spotlight, so now it's Pentecost and my time for center stage." No, the work of the Spirit is to honor Jesus, to point to Jesus, to bring everyone's attention to Jesus.

In recent times, the Holy Spirit has been called "the Cinderella" of the Trinity. That's meant to highlight the fact that, historically, the church hasn't paid as much attention to the Spirit as to the Father and the Son. That's true, but to make up for it there's sometimes now an overemphasis on sensational or spectacular experiences that people associate with the Spirit. I'm talking about ecstasies like speaking in tongues or being "slain in the Spirit" or holy laughter or even spiritual barking. Stressing the unusual as a sign of the Spirit's presence seems to meet a desire many people feel for something extraordinary to lift them out of the humdrum.

But if we study Scripture closely, we see that the essential work of the Holy Spirit is not to thrill us with unusual experiences, but simply to inspire us to receive, to proclaim, and to share God's love. It's to direct us to Jesus as the incarnation of that love. It's to lead us in becoming more and more Christ-like, grafting us onto the Jesus vine, enabling us to bear more and more of the Spirit's fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Jesus says of the Spirit, "He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you" (16:14). With divine shyness, the Holy Spirit points us to and centers us in Jesus.

When we look closely at the rest of the New Testament we see that this shyness belongs to the Father and the Son, too. In the Scriptures, each member of the Trinity keeps directing attention to the others.

One of the most famous icons commonly used in the Orthodox Church offers a striking picture of this. You can see it on page 7 in this morning's worship bulletin. Created by Andrei Rublev, it's called "Holy Trinity".

In it, three figures sit around a table. They represent the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It's hard to tell, however, which is which as each inclines his head towards the others. Each is in a posture of humble deference towards the others. No one stands out from or above the rest because, divinely shy, they're fully and lovingly together.

We see Jesus' shyness in the gospels' portrait of him. In them, he doesn't go around pointing to himself, thumping his chest, and shouting, "I'm the greatest." Instead, he says his power is from the Holy Spirit. It's the Spirit who comes upon him at his baptism. The Spirit drives him into the wilderness for his encounter with Satan. Throughout his ministry, the Spirit leads him.

In relation to the Father, Jesus says in John, chapter 8: "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me" (v. 54). Earlier in John he says, "I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just because I do not seek my own will but the will of him who sent me" (5:30). When the rich young ruler addresses Jesus as "Good Teacher", Jesus says, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." In his agony in the garden, Jesus prays to the Father, "Not my will, but yours be done." In Luke's gospel, after his resurrection, Jesus gives his disciples instructions "through the Holy Spirit". He points not to himself, but to the Father and the Spirit in whose power he does the Father's work. Within the Trinity's life, Jesus is shy- as is the Father.

In the gospels, there are only two times when the Father speaks. One is at Jesus' baptism; the other is at Jesus' transfiguration. Both times the voice from heaven says, "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased." At the transfiguration, the Father adds one more line- "Listen to him." This is the Father's direct and unmediated witness to the Son. The Father wants everyone to know above all, who we need to pay attention to. The Father doesn't say, "Listen to me." The Father says, "Listen to Jesus."

The Father is shy, the Son is shy, and the Spirit is shy. The whole blessed Trinity is shy as each member points repeatedly, selflessly, and faithfully to the others in their circle of eternal love.

Yet no matter how many times I put it out there this morning, I still have to admit that this is an uncommon way to think about God. Shyness has never made it onto any of the classic lists of God's attributes or into any of the church's creeds. It is there, though, in the Bible's talk of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And it's there not only with regard to the relationships within the Trinity, but also in the work that God does in relation to us.

There's shyness, for example, in God's act of creation. With godly deference and other-centeredness, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, eternally self-sufficient within their own Triune life, nevertheless make room for something else, and not just for something else, but for *someone* else- in fact, for many, many something and someone else's by letting their love creatively overflow. Apparently, God has no concern that giving life to others will in any way diminish God's life. In Genesis, chapter one, God says, "Let us make human beings in our image." In the love that is their life together the Trinity freely chooses to create others who can share in the joy of that same love.

There's shyness in God's creation of us. There's also shyness in God's saving of us. God's work of salvation is centered in the act of the Incarnation by which God lays aside the fullness of God's life in order to become one of us. In a holy deed of deference and other-centeredness far beyond our imaginations, God in Christ decides to take on our life with all of its suffering and brokenness so that in the end we and all of creation can be brought back to God.

In his letter to the Philippians, St. Paul talks about it this way: ". . . Christ Jesus who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, and being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death- even death on a cross" (4:5-8). As in every work of the Trinity, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit unite in striving to save us, in seeking to bring everything that God has made into the loving circle of God's shyness.

I acknowledge, too, that thinking about the Trinity is always a giant stretch for our minds. I know it certainly is for mine. In this vein, Christian writer and novelist, Dorothy Sayers, once wrote that to most

of us it must seem that “The Father is incomprehensible, the Son is incomprehensible, the Holy Spirit is incomprehensible, and the whole thing is incomprehensible. (The Trinity looks like) something put in by theologians to make (our faith) more difficult, (but having) nothing to do with (our) daily life . . .”

But the doctrine of the Trinity *is* meant to have major practical application for us. The point of believing it is not to get an “A” in some honors course in theological mathematics, but to help us see better the way that we’re meant to live. How is that?

According to our faith, the Triune God is at the heart of everything. At the center of all that is, is this glorious symphony of God’s shyness, the beautiful harmony of the Trinity’s mutual love by which we’re created, sustained, and redeemed. The core of reality, then, is not some blank, brute, and mindless matter or some isolated, capricious, and self-involved individual who does whatever he wants whenever he wants. Instead at the heart of everything is this Triune community of perfect love in whose image we are made. Made in this image, we see in the Trinity’s life what our life together is meant to be. The deference and other-centeredness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit with each other is the shyness that we’re meant to have with each other.

So, for instance, when we hear spouses say to their honeys, “You make me so much better than I’d ever have been on my own” or when we hear children say of their parents, “Without my Mom and Dad I’d have been lost a long time ago” or when we hear friends say of each other, “You help me be more of who I’m really meant to be”, we hear echoes of the Trinity.

Or when as fellow citizens, we say of each other and of those in other countries, “We’re all in this together and we want to lift up and encourage the very best each of us has to give,” or when we say of ourselves in relation to and in appreciation of everyone else, “Other people have talents, skills, and abilities that I don’t have; other people know things that I don’t know; other people can be right and I can be wrong; I know that rely on so many other people simply to stay alive; I know I need so many others to help me keep learning, growing, and maturing”- when we speak and honor these truths of our life together we keep faith with the Holy Trinity in whose image we are made.

We live as we are meant to live- in humble communion with our shy God. Amen.

Kurt Kirchoff

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, eternal Three-in-One, You are love. In love, You call to us, You come to us, and You reach out to us in so many ways.

You come to us as God the Father, creator of all worlds. In holy deference, You let Your love overflow to make us and all things. You give us life and sustain us through Your daily gifts of each other. You make us in Your image so that we come to life by living in love for one another just as You do with the Son and the Spirit.

You come to us as God the Son, Jesus Christ, God in our flesh, living our life, revealing You to us, suffering, dying, and rising on our behalf. We ask You to deepen our faithfulness to You in Jesus. Help us put on the same mind that he had, the mind of Christ, by which, like him, we humble ourselves in service to You and each other.

You come to us as God the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus Christ, the Comforter and Advocate who is Your near presence with us now. By Your Spirit, strengthen, support, and guide us in Your ways. By Your Spirit, fill us with every Christ-like grace so that we will be shy like You, shy towards all those that You love.

All thanks and praise be to You, O God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Make us one in You, just as You are One in each other. We pray this in Jesus’ name and as he has taught us, saying together, “Our Father, . . .” Amen.