

In Our Image; Go!

Shepherd's Grace Church

June 15, 2014

¹⁶Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt. 28: 16-20) (Read also: Gen. 1: 1-2: 4)

Yesterday I officiated at the memorial service of a person who was the son of a person I had buried three years earlier. I went through the same process of gathering information from the family for yesterday's service as I had three years earlier. The process is one I have developed over a period of 15 years and it invites the Power of the Holy Spirit to enter into the conversation and move people to share the things that are most on their mind regarding the loss of their loved one. It is a process I have come to trust and many of you have sat with me during this process so you kind of know how it goes.

Sometimes the conversation with a family will start slowly. Sometimes it will start quickly. Sometimes it will start and falter and will start again, sometimes it flows smoothly from beginning to end. Frequently, the process starts with tears and appropriate expression of grief until someone tells a humorous story and the group laughs. Frequently, that laughter is the trigger for a more open conversation where information starts to come very quickly. Most family members have humorous stories about their loved one and most want people to know the lighter side of their friend. Stories start to come that reflect a part of the character of a person. The stories generally only reflect a part of the character at first. People are very reluctant to share difficult issues. They do not want to "speak ill of the dead." Usually however, there will be a moment when difficult issues come up and more of the character is revealed.

The conversation is concluded when stories start to come very slowly again. This is an indication that the family and friends have said all they have to say and they are ready to move on, to let some of their grief go and to begin to accept the situation of both loss and celebration. The conversation is an amazing process and it allows me to gain incredible information regarding a person whom I knew only in part! It is a process I trust and it has never failed. It has always generated more information than I could ever use in a sermon at the deceased person's service. It is a process that works when God is invited in to it, and it is a process that is honest and open where little is held back.

The conversation I had with the family from yesterday's service was no exception. We sat and I invited them to pray. As I asked the Holy Spirit to come to the process, their stories came very quickly about the person who was so recently deceased. They grieved appropriately and shed tears at the unexpected loss then one of them told a story about a cake fight! We all laughed and the tension eased and the stories started to come!

The difference for me this time however, was an odd sense of similarity. As I listened to the family's stories they somehow seemed vaguely familiar. One thing I forgot to mention about this process of celebration is that I usually say very little after the process begins. The purpose is to gain information from the family and not for them to gain information from my perspective. As I listened and wrote, I couldn't help but think I had heard many of these stories before. The service on Saturday was for the son of a father at whose service I officiated three years earlier. The stories of the Son seemed surprisingly similar to those of the father.

My curiosity got the better of me as we concluded the conversation with the family. I came back to my computer as quickly as I could and pulled the outline of the sermon I delivered at the father's memorial service three years earlier. As I read, I was amazed! The first several paragraphs of my notes from the father's funeral were very nearly identical to the first several notes I made about the son. The similarities were uncanny! Both men were described in nearly identical words and the acts of love and care they showed for their families and friends were shockingly similar!

Both men had stories in their lives of inviting others to stay with them. Both men had stories of reaching out to strangers. Both men had stories of great love for family. Both had stories of an incredible work ethic. One of the stories about the work ethic of the father came from the son who said he learned to work hard from his dad! The phrasing of the story was almost identical to the phrasing of a story from one of the members of the son's family...the son of the deceased.

As this young man shared what he learned from his father, he did not know that it was almost identical to what the now deceased son had shared three years earlier. I wonder as we celebrate Trinity Sunday today and as we celebrate on Father's day, how seriously we take our responsibilities as fathers. Do we as men understand the significance of what we teach our children? Do we teach them well and offer them encouragement in the work we ask them to do? Do we recognize the long term impact of our words on the rest of their lives?

I suspect that most of us do not take the time to think as we work alongside our children that we are engaged in teaching moments with them. We just go to work and the teaching happens in an either positive or negative way. Our opportunity this day is to recognize as fathers the huge opportunity that exists. Our kids hang on our words and they learn from our actions. They are motivated by what we like, by what we say and by what we do! Our opportunity to teach is profound and we should ponder the possibilities very carefully!

I believe we are given a model of those possibilities in the scripture passage from Genesis this morning. In order to understand the possibility we must suspend all the science verses religion conversation that is continually in the news. We as Christians must understand that what is shared in the first chapter of Genesis is not offered as scientific fact. If God had wanted us to know the science God would have given us the information about creation in scientific terms. God would have explained that, working outside of time, God fashioned all the elements, conceived a plan and made provisions for "timely intercession" by humans that could lead that plan astray!

The first chapter of Genesis, however is not about science or about history. God does not invite here a debate regarding 6 literal or temporal days. Instead, God leaves that part for us to understand as mystery that will be revealed in the fullness...yes in the fullness of time. No, the first chapter of Genesis is offered to invite God's people into a relationship with the unknown, a power more awesome and available than they could have ever imagined. As part of the introduction then, God uses Chapter 1 as an opportunity to reveal God's character and nature!

Even from the first verse, God's nature is being revealed. "In the beginning (for those who wonder, this is "Outside of time") when the earth was a formless, shapeless void; the Spirit of God hovered above the face of the deep. Then God said..." If we are willing, there is much that can be learned from these few lines at the very beginning of God's invitation to us. As I noted above, the first part of God's work is accomplished outside of time. "In the beginning," we can understand as in God's dimension or eternity. For God, there is no beginning and no end, there just IS. If, at this moment then, you are beginning to understand God's answer to Moses when Moses asks, "Who shall I say sent me," you are a little closer to understanding God's nature. I AM! God says. "Say I AM sent me!" For God there is no "before" there is no "after", there IS!

The nature of God then "IS". There is more to God's nature however. The Spirit of God, which hovers above the formless shapeless nothingness is very descriptive of God's nature. The Hebrew word for Spirit is Ruach. That same word means breath or wind! The wind of creation was the very breath of God! God's Holy Spirit preparing, upon the command of God to bring creation into being...into time!

Then God says. As God speaks, the Word comes forth born on God's breath. Words can only exist in time so in the moment when the Word comes forth, it breaks through eternity and into time. In time, the word exists as it has always existed. The Apostle John describes the existence of the Word in this way: "In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God and all creation came into being through the Word and without the word, not one thing came into being." The word which had always existed is now born on the wind of God and given agency or license to create! Who or what is this creative agent?

John goes on to say that the Word dwelt among us as the Father's only son, filled with grace and truth! The human name of the Word, John tells us is Jesus Christ; the Son of God!" In the very beginning God the Father, the I AM of existence brought forth creation through the Word, God's Son born on the wind, the ruach, the Spirit of God.

When God spoke, the nature of God was revealed in three separate persons. God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit! The nature of God is revealed even in the very first verses of God's invitation to us humans as Trinity! It is important on this Trinity Sunday Morning that we accept this nature. God never speaks of Godself as Trinity but God demonstrates over and over again that God acts as Trinity; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit never acting independently from one another but always acting according to their function! Just as we can never fully understand the events of creation, so also, we can never fully understand this Triune nature of God. Today, we recognize it, we apprehend it, but we cannot fully comprehend it. We accept it on faith, just as we accept the nature of friends and family on faith.

How do we come to accept God's nature on faith? In the same way we come to accept the nature of our friends and family on faith. Our acceptance takes time. We are born to fathers and mothers and over time we learn that we can trust them...or sadly, that we cannot. Many mothers demonstrate that they are not trustworthy. They make bad decisions and they continue to make those bad decisions over and over again. Many fathers do not accept the responsibility of fatherhood. They abandon or alienate their children to the point where no relationship exists. Some fathers (and mothers) abuse their children physically, sexually, or emotionally. These examples of poor parenting exist and need to be spoken so that we can contrast them with good parenting; especially today on Father's Day, with good fathering! Fortunately, there are far more good fathers than bad! There are far more good parents than bad and today we celebrate those who strive to make this world a better place for their children and their families. We pray for those who have not yet discovered the joys of good parenting that one day they will make that discovery. WE pray that the words we speak today may encourage any who are desiring to make a change.

Today, more completely however, we offer the example of God's character which is also revealed in the first few verses of Genesis 1 as a model for all parents...especially our earthly fathers! Notice in the creation story as we have depicted it this morning, God the Father works alongside the Son. He does not stand and order the son! He does not beat or belittle the son. He works alongside. In this example, God teaches a work ethic. One of the most meaningful comments that came from the memorial service yesterday was Devin, John's son saying that he had learned his work ethic from his father. This was memorable because John, the son of Andy said almost exactly the same thing three years earlier! Fathers, hear this! Your sons, your children learn from you and they copy not only what you do but also what you teach! Generation of good parenting is passed on to generation so that the work of the father becomes the work of the son!

God not only comes along side the Son but also encourages the son. When God saw the light, God said it is good! Time after time in the creation story we hear God's praise of the work of the Word, the son. "It is good!" When I was a freshman in high school we worked with plastics in our shop class. We had to create a diagram for a project and complete the project according to our mechanical drawing. There were no computers then to help insure accuracy. As a result we had to sand and buff or (hopefully) small errors. I made a letter box and letter opener as my project and took them home to give to my father. To say that I am not very good with creative machines and these kinds of projects is to be kind. You would have never known it from my dad's response however! He said, "This is good!" He proudly put the letter box on his secretary's desk in the office and used the letter opener every day!

The next year, my brother Steve, who had a much better aptitude for creating these kinds of projects, made exactly the same box. It was much better than mine and anyone could tell that. My father, however never said a word about Steve's box verses mine. When Steve gave him the box he said, "It is good!" He used exactly the same words of praise he used with me! Good fathers know how to praise their sons and daughters while encouraging them so they do not turn away from the effort that is needed. Throughout the creation story, God did this. Fathers, a careful reading of the creation story this morning should encourage all of us to be more supportive of our children.

This support is exactly where the Gospel lesson meets the creation story this morning. Notice that only the eleven come to Galilee. Judas, having made his decision to leave the family is not with the others. He has chosen a life in eternity without the presence of his Father or his friends. Fathers, sometimes children make these choices. Scripture tells us Jesus did everything He could to invite Judas to a different choice but in the end, He knew it was Judas' decision to make. God does not force God's love on us. To do so would be the equivalent of being a cosmic rapist. Instead, God encourages and allows us to make the choice of God's great love or the absence of that love. Jesus therefore welcomes the 11 who have chosen Him.

When they see Him they worship Him. Worship is a learned experience! In their time together Jesus has obviously taught the disciples what worship looks like and when it is appropriate. In this instance they recognize the mighty act of creation that has taken place in the Son's willing act of sacrifice which is now met with the love of the Father! Their worship is for a God who is so magnanimous in His love for creation that God did not withhold even God's own son! They also worship because they recognize a God so powerful that not even death could separate God from the great love of God's Son! Their worship is awefilled and inspired.

Their worship is also filled with doubt! This may seem surprising but I believe all good worship should be filled with doubt! Doubt raises questions. Questions are legitimate as we seek to get to know God better. As we noted earlier, God desires to reveal God's nature and character to us. What better way for us to know God more than to ask questions, to doubt? The disciples wonder about practical matters. Will Jesus now assume control of the world? How can this happen? The Romans have already started rumors that the disciples have stolen the body in an attempt to cover up the truth about His surprisingly uneventful death. How could they overcome these rumors? Moreover, how could it be that the Son of God was allowed to go to the cross in the first place? Why would an all powerful God, the author of creation, the master of the universe allow such a thing to happen? They doubted Jesus' reputation could ever be restored to the point where He could be their Messiah! The way Jesus dealt with these doubts would define the nature of the relationship He and the disciples would have.

Fathers, it is important that we recognize that our children will have doubts. They will question the way we teach, the instruction we give, the plan we have. It is important for them to know we accept their questions. It is important that we answer their questions appropriately, patiently and with a mind open to their ways of doing things. As fathers we should be willing to allow for doubt on the part of our kids. We may know best but we do not only know only! Sometimes there is more than one way to get things done and we can allow for our children wanting to experiment. Their doubts, when met with our patience and love will allow for their trust in the future. That trust comes from faith.

Jesus met the doubts of the disciples with faith. He came to them! He did not wait for them to come to him. So often as parents we wait for our children to come to us. God's model invites, encourages us to go to them. When there is a problem, we should seek them out. Sure, they will say get out of my face or "I don't want to talk about it." What they are really saying is prove to me I can trust you. Get in my face and force me to talk about it by acknowledging that I am a person with feelings and thoughts! When we

meet them where they are, when we come to them, they will be more open(I did not say completely open) to our conversation.

Jesus reminded the disciples of His authority. After he came to their turf, after He met them, he reminded them that ultimately He bore the responsibility for them. He was going to give them plenty of latitude to explore who He was and who they were but they were and are still His responsibility. Our kids are our responsibility. Frequently we say, "They just won't listen to me!" but that does not eliminate the responsibility! We as parents must never abdicate our responsibility for our children and we must always let them know they are ours, that we love them and that we care for the choices they make!

Jesus makes this known by telling them exactly what is going to happen next. The translation in most versions of the Bible is unfortunate. Most read Go. The Greek however, reads more accurately, "When you go." What Jesus was telling them was not that they must go and do the work He commanded them. Go was not the command! What he was saying was, "When you go," when you leave the mountain when you resume your life, you will have the opportunity to tell others about me. Don't just tell them! Teach them!

Make disciples of all the nations! Be like me and teach them all that I have taught you! This is your mission! This is what I have trained you for! Not to just go and get out of my sight but to teach others all I have taught you and this is what I have taught you. "Love One Another!" My commandment to you is that you love one another. Teach that! I am trusting you with that. You have done well working alongside me and I know you can do it! Go then and teach! Your mission is to teach! Your mission is to be an example as I have been an example for you. Remember when I washed your feet? Never thing you are better than anyone else. Remember the work ethic I learned from my Father? I taught it to you! Be willing to share love with one another in what ever manner necessary!

Fathers , do not underestimate the influence you have on your children! They have learned from you and at some point you need to give them permission to share what they have learned. Let them know it is OK for them to become the teachers, the sharers, the doers in this society! Let them know that you will be there to support them and care for their concerns however, the world now belongs to them! What better legacy could we as fathers leave than to have our children say they learned their work ethic, their love for the Lord, their ability to work out their faith from their fathers!

In our image we should tell our children to go, not to just go but to teach, to share, to improve the world and bring about the Kingdom of God which reveals the character of God, the character of love by reminding us that "In the beginning," before time began God has us in mind when God speaks and the word is born into the World on the Spirit of God! Amen!