



May 30, 2010
Trinity Sunday

*The Hard Work of Thinking Theologically**
Rev. James Lamkin

Psalm 8; Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15

We come to worship to think about God. We come to worship to express gratitude to God. We come to worship to experience God. We come to worship to remember times when we experienced God. It's all about God.

Whether the *modus operandi* with which we do that is somber liturgy or joyous laughter, whether the scaffolding is song or sermon, prayer or praise or passing of the peace—it's all about God.

And any human response to God is at best stuttering, incomplete, and always, always a mixed bag of motives. And yet, we come to worship God.

For me, and for most of us, that effort...this yearning is the Middle C of our hunger—this connection with that which is transcendent to us, that which is the Ground of our Being below us.

And *rituals are the eyelets of life through which we lace our lives and notice that our lives are threaded through and through with the life of God*—as some of us did yesterday on the front end of a Memorial Day weekend as a flag draped casket held the body of our friend, Jim Williams and our tears were too many and our relationships too deep to hold them or tote them...but the liturgy did so for us—it carried our laments and loves for us.

Rituals are the eyelets of life through which we lace our lives and notice that our lives are threaded through and through with the life of God—as some of us did yesterday afternoon when Susan Harlan's daughter Molly tied the knot with Parker on the edge of Lake Rabun with

musical accompaniment provided by many a chirping bird and the fiddle playing of Beth Lewis and the embrace of Barbara and Virginia and JB and Gordon and Billie and Liz and Beth and Avery and Rhonda –Northside Drivers all who witnessed the words and wonder of a wedding.

Rituals are the eyelets of life through which we lace our lives and notice that our lives are threaded through and through with the life of God.

Thank God for rituals which serve as scaffold, as trellis, because our speech, certainly my speech, lacks and is less than worship asks.

And so, today is Trinity Sunday. Where we attend to a notion, that has been the underpinning of Christian theology ever since the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE; and that the church kept fooling with at least through the first five centuries. Anybody up to that?

Last week I quoted the Episcopal priest, Robert Farrar Capon, who said, “The capacity of human beings to speak of the ultimate being and doing of God is like the capacity of an oyster to describe a ballerina.”

So I thought about an opening line for a Trinity Sunday as a rip-off from Herman Melville, “Call me Oyster.”

The word *trinity* you know does not appear in the Bible. It appears in *The Matrix*, *Trinity*, but not in the Bible.

But like in today’s texts—the notion is like the canvas on which the art is painted. The Apostle Paul offers what he has, his autobiographical theology—that peace with God comes, has come, through Jesus Christ. And that Christ is the broker, the passageway, the access, is Paul’s word, “through whom we have obtained *access* to God’s grace,”

And since we all need doors that are handicap/accessible, how does this accessibility to God and grace get played-out? Well through quite an evolution of challenges: “suffering that produces endurance, endurance that produces character and character that produces hope.”

You might keep that in mind the next time you pray for more hope. Suffering produces...pain produces.

And Barbara Brown Taylor is right, “Pain makes theologians of us all.”

But this hope that Paul says finally produces is a hope that does not disappoint because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us...

Peace with God, accessed through the person, the life, the way of Christ, poured into our hearts, our lives through the Holy Spirit that has been given, has been given, to us.

Not once does the word *trinity* appear. But in a way, it is like saying son, daughter, father, mother, sharing a last name, a residence, food, and shelter—they are family even if the word family is not used.

Maybe it is kind of like that.

I remember coming across an “ah ha” as I was doing my doctoral work. And I read the line by The English theologian, Leonard Hodgson, who said, “The early Christians were Trinitarian in their experience before they were Trinitarian in their theology.”

Yes. As they were figuring out their experiences of having their lives changed by encountering this person full of God named Jesus, and by their memories of God from the Hebrew bible and the honoring of traditions, and by the dynamic of the God’s presence among them as they lived out their lives...a triptych emerged. It was the best speech they had for that which cannot be adequately said.

Then again, I am Oyster; and so were they.

Since, as Baptists, we're all on our own anyway—and though scripture and tradition better inform our thinking, we all end-up with a roll-your-own theology, here is what I believe.

I believe thinking theologically builds our muscles—as long as we confess that our theology always is incomplete and must be seasoned with humility. Prolific writer and priest, Richard Rohr, in his book *Everything Belong* says: “God is always bigger than the boxes we build for God, so we should not waste too much time protecting the boxes.”

I believe that whatever else spirituality is, it is relationships. I heard the poet, David Whyte, give a reading from his new book, *The Three Marriages*, in Asheville a few weeks ago. In it, he describes marriage as a sustained conversation. A sustained conversation. I'm sure the Apostle Paul would chime in, “didn't I just say that?” “Suffering that produces endurance, endurance that produces character and character that produces hope” the conversation is between the self and God and both are being transformed through the conversation.

Spirituality is about sustained conversation with God and self and others *and God's world*. Spirituality does not leave lament up to the oysters of the Louisiana Gulf Coast. Since wetlands can't weep, since marshes can't mourn, we “mindful human beings” must lament and lobby by proxy for them.

I believe God is known best in times that feel like wandering and other times that feel like wondering. We started worship with the poem of a Hebrew shepherd sitting in silence in a moonlit field staring at the stars. And he breaks the silence with a whispered poem, “when I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them.” That you are mindful, that you are *zawkar*, the Hebrew word, mindful. You think about us. If humans do theology, God does humanology. God thinks about us as we wander and as we wonder.

I believe in God is still in the process of revealing God's self. As Paul put it, this produces that and that produces this. Or as John put it, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth.”

As spooky as that sounds—and as much weird wildfire religion as that fans—I think it is true. The Spirit is still up to something and there is more to learn. I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth.” John is saying that Jesus didn't say it all.

It is in our vision statement. “...to discern and act upon the ongoing revelation of God in our time and place.”

Or as John Claypool used to benedict at the end of every worship service, “and remember you are being redeemed.”

I believe gratitude opens us to God. A lot of the time, theology is hard work...but yesterday, when we stood at the graveside of Jim Williams and savored his large life of 91 years, when we stood at the lakeside with Molly and Parker afternoon framed with blue skies and green leaves and gentle wind and birds songs—I was, we were, overwhelmed with gratitude.

And gratitude requires someone to thank. And we did; and we praised God from whom all blessings flow. Amen.

*These are some of the notes James Lamkin used in preaching the Sunday morning sermon.