

"The God Who Works Through"
Sermon for Trinity Sunday
Lectionary Year C
May 30, 2010
Texts: Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15
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In many of our churches today it is Trinity Sunday, the one Sunday of the year we focus our attention on our understanding of God as three-in-one. When we speak in the Church of the trinity, we are talking about three persons, and for those of us who grew up listening to the radio more than going to church, the three persons of the trinity are not Crosby, Stills, and Nash or Emerson, Lake, and Palmer. Actually there is a song that was popular when I was in college that names the persons in the trinity correctly. It is Don McLean's "American Pie," and it has the following line in it: "The three men I admire most—the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—caught the last train for the coast the day the music died."

The trinity is a big deal in the church. That's what Ron Chapman used to call a "no-jive" statement. The trinity is a big deal because it's how we think about and talk about God. It's how we conceive of God. Simply put, what the trinity means is that *God is one in three ways of being one*. God is not three; we don't worship three gods. We worship one God. God does not have a split personality, being Father part of the time, Son part of the time, and Spirit part of the time. God is one, but God is one in three ways of being one.

What is true for God is also true of us. For instance, I am one person, but I wear more than one hat, have more than one identity, play

more than one role in my life. I am a pastor; I am a husband; I am a parent. It's the same me in all three cases, and I never quit being a parent or a husband when I am a pastor and vice versa. So it is with God as well. God the Son is as much God as God the Father, and God the Spirit is as much God as God the Son and God the Father. God is one in three ways of being one. But the trinity is not only who *God is*, the trinity is what *God does* to accomplish God's purposes. *The trinity is God in action as well as being.*

We have a pretty good picture of just how the trinity functions in the passage of scripture that was read earlier from Paul's letter to believers much like us in Rome. A little word that Paul uses is particularly helpful for us, as it must have been for them, the word "through." That's the language of action. *God works through* the Son, Jesus Christ, and *through* the Holy Spirit to do certain things for us. Let's look at what it is *God does* through these other two persons of the trinity.

Paul tells us that *through our Lord Jesus Christ we have peace with God*. The Father works through the Son to justify us, to be reconciled to us, to make peace with us. Why is it that peace needs to be made between us and God? Were we at war or something? Yes, in a sense. Sin is what has brought about our separation from God, our estrangement from the Father, our alienation from the Creator. The atoning sacrifice of Christ's death on the cross restores our relationship with God. The peace treaty between us and God is signed with Jesus' own blood, shed for us.

Through Christ, God is demonstrating most dramatically that God is

not against us but for us, and through faith in Christ we demonstrate that we are not against God but for God. Through Christ, we get to come home to our mothering God for a family reunion. Through Christ, God throws her arms around us, tells us how glad she is to see us, hands us a plate full of fried chicken, potato salad, beans, and biscuits, and asks us to sit next to her and catch her up on everything that is going on with us. And as we describe the events of our life, there is a smile on our Mother's face—a smile of care and concern, acceptance and approval, support and encouragement, pride and joy. Through Christ we have this kind of peace in the presence of God.

Paul goes on to tell us that *through Christ we have obtained from God access to grace*. We stand in grace, wade in it like in the ocean, float in it like we do in the deep end of the swimming pool. We don't stand under judgment or condemnation. *We stand in grace*. It's all around us. We're waist-high in it, and it keeps us afloat. It's the foundation of our lives. It allows us to stand tall and even to rejoice or brag. Paul says that we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. Through Christ that is what God promises to do for us, to transform us into the image of his Son so that we can share in what the Son has, the glory of God. Through Christ, God adopts us as his children, so that we are blessed by God in the same way Jesus is. All this is what God does for us through God's Son.

In the passage from Romans, Paul also describes a little of what God does for us through the Holy Spirit. *Through the Spirit, God pours his love into our hearts*. Isn't that a beautiful thing to imagine? The pure, unbounded love of God is poured into us like a pitcher of refreshing

lemonade into a tall glass of ice on a hot summer day like today. The unconditional, unrestricted love of God is allowed to flow into us like a river of clean, clear, cool water on a Colorado mountainside. Through the Spirit our hearts are flooded, bathed, drowned in the love of God. God pours his love into our hearts, and isn't that exactly what our hearts are most thirsty for?

Love is not all we receive from God through the Spirit. The passage from John's Gospel that was read earlier reminds us that through the Spirit we gain something else. *We have the opportunity to know the truth.* In fact, that is how John refers to this member of the trinity, as the Spirit of truth. One of my favorite political films is *Bulworth* with Warren Beatty, in which he plays a burned-out U.S. senator seeking reelection but preferring instead to die, so much so that he puts a contract out on himself. From time to time in the movie he encounters an old black man, a prophetic figure, who tells him repeatedly, "Be a spirit, not a ghost; Be a spirit, not a ghost."

Bulworth decides that since he is going to die anyway, he is going to start doing what politicians seem almost incapable of doing, he decides to tell the truth, that politics really has everything to do with taking money and nothing to do with helping people. It is the truth, the naked truth, the cold and hard truth about the world of power. And perhaps in this way Bulworth discovers what it means to be a spirit, not a ghost. It may mean to understand that the Holy Spirit is the spirit of truth and that to live in the Spirit means to take the risk of speaking the truth no matter what it costs. Through the Spirit, God will lead us into this and all truth.

So let's take a quick inventory here. Peace, grace, hope, glory,

love, truth. All of these things come to us from God through the Son and the Spirit. But God doesn't stop there. That's a comma, not a period. Paul says emphatically, "Not only that," as if to say, "That's not all, folks!" God isn't done yet. God not only works through himself as Son and Spirit, *God even works through the circumstances of our lives.* God acts in our daily living, in all our situations. Paul makes the outlandish and scandalous claim that because of the God who works through all things for good and redemptive possibilities, we can even boast in our sufferings.

Boast in our sufferings? Is that possible? What comes to my mind when I imagine boasting about sufferings is the scene in the movie *Jaws* toward the end when Roy Scheider, Richard Dreyfuss, and Robert Shaw are on the boat late at night, drinking, singing, and comparing scars. Do you remember it? The scene starts out comically, but it ends dramatically as Shaw's character talks about being on a World War II naval vessel that sank in shark-infested waters and how he was one of the lucky ones who survived the shark attacks.

Our sufferings can feel like that, can't they? We can feel like we are adrift in the sea of life with sharks circling. You can feel the sun beating down; you can taste the salt; you can smell the fish. You've been there, done that, got the tattoo! It's no fun is it? You know what suffering is. You've been through a divorce, lost a job, had a loved-one die. You've been ill. You've been in pain. You've been depressed. You've had your self-esteem eroded in some way. You've failed at something, been attacked for some reason, been treated unfairly. You've been taken advantage of, abused, or rejected. Life has kicked

some sand in your face. Was God there? Doing what?

Faith says that ours is a God who works through, even through suffering. What kind of a God works through suffering? A Father, Son, and Holy Ghost who refuse to take the last train to the coast the day the music dies in your life. A God who will work through *anything*, even something tragic, to bring about some good result, some positive gain, some redemptive possibility. Paul even spells out a kind of formula for how it happens. Here's the equation: *suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.*

Is Paul right about this? Think of someone you know who is a truly hopeful person. Maybe it's the brightness of her eyes or the broadness of his smile or the quickness of her laugh that reveals a hopeful outlook in the person you know. I bet that she or he is a person of character who has endured suffering. Thanks to the grace of God, that person has lived through something painful and has come out on the other side blessed in some way and knows it. That person understands that hope does not disappoint, because *God does not disappoint.*

What kind of a God works through suffering? The God who works even through suffering is the God for whom nothing is impossible and who will not be prevented from helping you, even if, no, especially if you are suffering. God won't let suffering stand in the way of God's love and grace and glory and peace. Nothing can separate us from God, not even suffering. So nothing can separate us from hope, not even suffering. Through Christ and through the Spirit and through even the worst of our circumstances, God makes it possible for us to have hope,

not in spite of our sufferings, but because of them.

Let's be clear about something. God never, ever causes suffering. God does not bring about suffering. It is not God who is responsible for the suffering you have experienced or are experiencing now, but God can work through that suffering to make you more like Christ. Please remember this as well: the God who works through suffering is the very same God who guides us into all the truth, who pours his love into our hearts, who allows us to obtain access to grace and hope and glory, and who is at peace with us.

Do you know this God who works through? Do you know the God who works through the Son and the Spirit and who also works through all the circumstances of your life? Do you know the God who is acting in your life right now, this morning, for good, no matter what your situation is? Do you know this God? I pray that you do. If you do not yet know God, I pray that you will soon, so that you can realize more fully how active God already is in your life and so you, too, may find endurance, character, and most of all, hope.