

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, Trinity Sunday, May 22, 2016

**It's a Puzzlement**  
Dr. Kenneth Humphreys  
May 22, 2016

Romans 5:1-5 John 16:12-15

You may have seen the movie, "The King and I" starring Yul Brynner and Deborah Kerr. It is a beautiful musical production about a Welch governess who is hired to be the nanny and teacher for the many children of the King of Siam.

The culture clash between this outspoken woman from the British Isles and the absolute monarch of Siam forms the gist of the story. If you have not seen it, look it up on Netflix or Amazon.com. It is a great way to spend a few hours watching a good story and enjoying some fine music.

In one scene of the film, Yul Brynner, the King, gets confused over something Deborah Kerr says and ponders it saying, "*It's a puzzlement.*"

Today is Trinity Sunday, the Sunday after Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended on the apostles and the crowd in Jerusalem for the annual Pentecost festival.

What is the Holy Spirit? What exactly did the descent of the Spirit mean? What was Jesus trying to tell the apostles in our scripture reading from John? What is Paul talking about in our reading from Romans when he says that "... The Holy Spirit ...has been given to us"? It's a puzzlement, a real puzzlement indeed.

Let us put our scripture reading from John in context. It is the night before Jesus was arrested. Jesus had told the apostles that he would be betrayed and that he would be denied. Peter protested and Jesus told Peter that he would deny him three times before the cock crowed at dawn.

The Rev. Shannon Kershner, former pastor of the Black Mountain Presbyterian Church and now head of staff at one of the four largest Presbyterian churches in the country gave a sermon four years ago in Montreat at a meeting of the Presbytery of Western North Carolina in which she addressed this "puzzlement" --- what we call the Doctrine of the Trinity.

Rev. Kershner said, *“What on earth could be more difficult to hear, to bear, than the truth that their beloved friend was going to suffer and die; and furthermore, at least one of them, would betray him; and at least one of them, maybe all of them, would deny him?”*

Jesus told them, “I have much more to say to you, more than you can bear.”  
What did he mean? It’s a puzzlement.

Then Jesus muddies the water even more saying, *“But when he, the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.”* What is this Spirit? It’s a puzzlement.

This Spirit is the third part of what we call the Trinity --- Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But what is the Trinity? It’s a puzzlement for most Christians and even for us pastors.

Barbara Brown Taylor<sup>(1)</sup> commented that the doctrine of the Trinity is *“... a logic-buster. Why does God need three names? How does God inhabit three forms? How can God be both three and one?”*

It’s a puzzlement.

She says further that the Bible itself compounds the problem because scripture makes it sound as if the three parts of the Trinity are independent of each other. Jesus says that he is going to the Father but that, once he is gone, he will send an Advocate, the Holy Spirit.

She asks, *“Who are all these people? How can God the Father be his own son? And if Jesus is God, to whom is he [praying]...? And where does the Holy Spirit come in? Is that the spirit of God, the spirit of Jesus, or someone else altogether? If they are all one, then why do they come and go at different times, and how can one of them send another of them?”*

It’s a puzzlement and it will probably always be a puzzlement.

St. Patrick tried to explain the Trinity with a shamrock which has three co-equal leaves but still is one plant.

Others, including me, have tried to explain it with water. Water can be ice, a solid; a liquid; or steam, a gas --- but it can’t be all three at the same time.

According to Shirley C. Guthrie, Jr.<sup>(2)</sup>, *“... the doctrine of the Trinity is ... the church’s admittedly inadequate way of trying to understand and guard against false interpretation of the uniquely biblical-Christian understanding of who God is, what God*

*is like, how and where God is at work in the world, what God thinks about us human beings, does for us, requires of us, promises us.*

*“Christians do not believe in the doctrine of the Trinity ... We believe in a living God. But the God we believe in is the God this doctrine confesses, the one living and true God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Faith in this God --- and lives shaped by faith in this God --- is what distinguishes Christians from people who do not believe in God at all and from other religious people whose faith and life is shaped by other views of God.”*

It's a puzzlement --- but does it matter?

Shannon Kershner said that if the Presbyterian Church is going to be our spiritual home, we are “... *going to have to be comfortable with a bit of ambiguity...*

*“... God is not done with us as Christians, as Presbyterians, just yet. We have yet to be led into all the truth that God would have us know. The journey still continues. We are still being reformed.”*

In God's own good time there will no longer be a puzzlement. He was with us in the beginning as Creator. He came as the Son, our Redeemer. He is now with us as the Holy Spirit, as our Counselor.

As Paul reminds us in our reading from Romans 5, *“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.”*

Yes, it's a puzzlement. But what a wonderful puzzlement it is.

**Amen.**

1. Barbara Brown Taylor, Home By Another Way, Cowley Publications, Cambridge, MA, 1999
2. Shirley C. Guthrie, Jr., Christian Doctrine, rev. ed., Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1994.

Note: Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011

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*Liturgical color – white*

**This is the day the Lord has made.  
let us rejoice and be glad in it.**

Announcements

Call to Worship (Responsive)

O Holy Trinity, One God in Three Persons,  
**we behold in the splendor of creation  
your majesty and our responsibility.**

O Holy Trinity, One God in Three Persons,  
**we behold in the face of Jesus Christ  
your divinity and our humanity.**

O Holy Trinity, One God in Three Persons,  
**we behold in the Spirit of truth  
your glory and our calling.**

**Bound to you forever, we will ever praise your name!**

Let us worship God.

\*Opening Hymn      “Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!”      #138

Opening Prayer

O God,  
we honor this day  
the majesty and the mystery of your name.  
You are both infinite and intimate,  
known and unknowable,

transcendent and transparent.  
In love, you have made us your own,  
and invite us to join in your divine dance.  
We will never rest until we rest in you,  
Blessed Trinity,  
one God forever and ever.  
**Amen.**

Prayer Response Inside front cover of hymnal – In Unison  
*Hear Our Prayer, O Lord, Hear Our Prayer, O Lord, Incline Thine ear to us, And grant us Thy peace. **Amen.***

Psalm of Praise Psalm 8, a psalm of David (pew Bible page 845). Responsive.  
Please read the even numbered verses responsively.

<sup>1</sup> LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!  
You have set your glory in the heavens.

<sup>2</sup> **Through the praise of children and infants  
you have established a stronghold against your enemies,  
to silence the foe and the avenger.**

<sup>3</sup> When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,

<sup>4</sup> **what is mankind that you are mindful of them,  
human beings that you care for them?**

<sup>5</sup> You have made them a little lower than the angels  
and crowned them with glory and honor.

<sup>6</sup> **You made them rulers over the works of your hands;  
you put everything under their feet:**

<sup>7</sup> all flocks and herds, and the animals of the wild,

<sup>8</sup> **the birds in the sky, and the fish in the sea,  
all that swim the paths of the seas.**

<sup>9</sup> LORD, our Lord,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Call to Confession

By faith in Jesus Christ,  
we are given access to the grace of God.  
Standing in that grace,  
we now confess our sins before God,  
seeking forgiveness and peace.

Prayer of Confession (Unison)

**O Lord, our Sovereign,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth.  
Yet we put aside your majesty,  
seeking our own power and gain.  
We set aside our responsibility for the earth  
entrusted to our care.  
By both carelessness and design,  
we pollute air, land, and waters.  
In our greed, we use more resources than we rightly need.  
We confess that we do not fully comprehend the damage  
we have done  
to the birds of the air, the creatures of the sea,  
and the animals that live in forests and fields.  
Forgive us, we pray.  
Let your majesty fill our senses,  
and pervade our actions,  
that we may become better stewards of creation.  
Call us, in every infant's cry,  
to care for one another so that all your people flourish.  
In Christ's name we pray. Amen.**

Assurance of God's Pardon (Responsive)

Friends, we are still standing in the grace of Christ.  
Because God's love has been poured into our hearts

through the Holy Spirit,  
we are set free to love God and neighbor,  
and to work for the reconciliation of the world.

**We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.**

**Thanks be to God!**

\*Gloria Patri

Childrens' Message

Prayer for Illumination

Living Word,  
you still have many things to say to us.  
Speak, and we will try to bear them.  
By your Word,  
may the Spirit guide us into all truth,  
that our lives may glorify you.

**Amen.**

Epistle Reading: Romans 5:1-5 (pew Bible page 1750)

<sup>1</sup> Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we<sup>[a]</sup> have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>2</sup> through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. <sup>3</sup> Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; <sup>4</sup> perseverance, character; and character, hope. <sup>5</sup> And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

Gospel Reading: John 16:12-15 (pew Bible page 1678)

<sup>12</sup> "I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. <sup>13</sup> But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.

<sup>14</sup> He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you. <sup>15</sup> All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you.”

The word of the Lord

**Thanks be to God**

\*Congregational Hymn “My Hope is Built on Nothing Less” #379

Sermon **“It’s a Puzzlement”** Dr. Kenneth Humphreys



Choral Anthem “Glory to God in the Highest” Mormon Tabernacle Choir (©1993, Sony Music Entertainment, Inc.). Used by Permission. CCLI License 11224027. (Track 13, CD 23)

\*Confession of Faith Apostles Creed, Ecumenical version

**I believe in God, the Father almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.**

**I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried;  
he descended to the dead.**

**On the third day he rose again;  
he ascended into heaven,  
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,  
and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.**

**I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church,  
the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting. AMEN.**

Tithes and Offerings

Out of the abundance of God's own life,  
we have received the abundance of God's creation, God's word,  
and God's love.

Why, then, should we live as though we are threatened with scarcity?

Let us return to God a portion of all that we have been given,  
with joyous and glad abandon.

Let us present our tithes and offerings to the Lord.

\*Doxology #592 – In Unison

*Praise God from whom all blessings flow; Praise Him, all creatures here below; Praise Him above, ye heavenly host: Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.*

Prayers of the People and the Lord's Prayer (Responsive)

Holy God, you are more than we can know or name,  
yet we call on you again and again for you alone are God.

We cannot live apart from you,  
for you have called us into your triune life.

Your steadfast love surrounds us all our days.

Wherever we may be—

on a high mountain or a path in a shadowed valley,

at a crossroads on our journey,

outside the gates of welcome or in some inner circle—

you call to us,

delighting in the human race.

We come before you in thanksgiving

for all the gifts you have given that delight us so:

for the beauty of this season;

for the lives of those who bless us beyond their knowing;

for this community of faith by which we are nurtured and challenged;

for opportunities to serve you by serving others;

for goals accomplished;

and for the gift of life granted yet again today.

We come before you humbly and hopeful in need:

for those we know who are suffering today

because of illness in mind, body, or spirit;

for those trying to make a difficult decision;

for those grieving a loss, an ending, a dream deferred.

We pray for healing and strength in every broken place of our lives.

We long for the hope you alone can give—

hope that does not disappoint us

but rolls away stones of death and despair.  
We pray for those whose livelihood is precarious,  
for those who live at the edge of poverty's precipice,  
and for those who live in temporary shelter and tenuous provision.  
In the public square and in the privacy of our conscience,  
help us find the will and the way toward a common good.  
We come before you earnestly and urgently for this world in turmoil:  
for the chaos loose in the natural world—  
drought and floods, earthquakes and tornadoes—  
heal the earth, we pray.  
May those who are starving, thirsty,  
or left in destruction's debris be restored.  
We pray for the turmoil we cause  
through war and violence, hatred and prejudice,  
by our indifference and by our calculation.  
Bring an end to our warring ways,  
until civilians and soldiers live in safety and peace.  
Root out of our hearts the seeds of bigotry and narrow-mindedness.  
Stir us from apathy, increase in us empathy  
that we may love as you love.  
Holy God, we have done so much to disrupt, disengage,  
and even destroy what you have created and called good.  
Still you are determined to delight in the human race.  
So, make us delight-full.  
Help us to delight in you by living and playing in ways that please you.  
Help us to delight in neighbors near and far  
by living and playing in ways that restore true communion.  
Make us delightful all our days  
until we greet with joy the kingdom you are bringing.  
In Christ Jesus we pray the prayer that he taught us, **Our Father ... Amen.**

\*Charge and Blessing

Go out this day  
participating in the life of the triune God—  
by honoring mutuality,  
living in equality and justice,  
and celebrating the amazing diversity  
by which our communion is enriched.

May the grace of Christ Jesus grant you peace;  
may the Holy Spirit guide you into all truth;  
and may the love of God fill your heart  
so that you may find hope  
in every circumstance of this life,  
and give glory to God.

**Amen.**