First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

6/4/23

Foolishness

Matthew 28:16-20

**16**Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. **17**When they saw him, they worshiped him, but they doubted. **18**And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. **19**Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit **20**and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

I have a confession to make. I was somewhat at a loss, this week, trying to figure out how I was going to preach this passage, given that it’s Trinity Sunday, and today’s reading seems to have very little to do with Trinitarian doctrine. I find it difficult, at the best of times to understand, much less articulate, the idea of God in Three Persons, and Trinity Sunday has always posed a challenge for me.

So, I was sitting at my desk reading through the commentaries, which I’ve got to say were not at all helpful this week, and I was grumbling to myself, thinking that maybe I should just ditch this reading for one that I could preach on with more confidence. Then I remembered that our music and worship team had, at my specific request, picked hymns to match Trinity Sunday so, with a big ‘ol sigh’ I decided to take a shot and trust that the Holy Spirit would provide me with the right words.

Then on Friday, I received a call from John asking if we could move Candi’s baptism up to this Sunday. The family was going to be in town and they really wanted to be in attendance to support Candi. John said that he knew it was short notice, but if there was any possibility of making it happen, that’d be really great. Well, I’m not someone who’s going to stand in the way of a person wanting to be baptized, even if it is on short notice, so I got to work. All of a sudden, everything fell into place. Session gave its unanimous approval in record time (I think it was just under 30 minutes from the time I sent the text message out, to receiving the final yes), and I found the hook I’d been looking for to hang this sermon on. Funny how God works, isn’t it?

In the New Revised Standard translation of the Matthew text, the heading reads “The Commissioning of the Disciples.” Matthew, places these verses at the very end of his account, immediately following Jesus’ resurrection. They serve as the conclusion of Matthews writings and these verses are known, collectively, as the Great Commission. In verses 19 and 20, we hear Jesus commanding his followers to, ***19*** *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit* ***20****and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.* You’re going to hear those verses once more today, as they are also included in the baptismal liturgy. Jesus inextricably links baptism to discipleship, in these verses, and tells us that baptism is to be administered in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirt. This is the formula which became the basis for the doctrine of the Trinity.

Now, understand, the word Trinity does not appear in the Bible, and the concept of the Trinity wasn’t fully developed until three centuries after Christ’s time on earth. It wasn’t until the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D., that it was first explicitly stated. But even in the Nicene Creed, we don’t get a clear articulation of exactly what the phrase God in Three Persons means.

And that raises a question: Do any of us really know the nature of God? Scripture provides us with a pretty clear understanding of Jesus; his humanity, his divinity, and his mission. The descriptions of the Holy Spirt tend to use words that are, at best, metaphorical, a rushing wind, tongues of fire, etc. Somewhat more difficult to understand, but not completely incomprehensible. God’s nature, though, is something entirely different. Yes, we use words like Father, Lord and Creator, among others, to try and understand who God is. But these descriptions are imperfect. When we start to understand that God is in all, through all and around all, these attempts to define God, can actually limit how we understand who God is and how God works. I would argue that attempting to define what and who God is, is nothing more than foolishness. The way I see it, God exists outside of our understanding of time and space and putting God into a box only creates a scenario where we don’t allow God to fully work in our lives or the life of this world.

So, to me, arguments about the makeup of the Trinity, and whether God exists as a being that is 3 in 1, as most Christians believe, or as 3 distinct individuals working together, as other Christians affirm, is foolish and a waste of time. Of course, we’re all curious about God, what God may look like and how God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit interact and, ultimately, we will know the answers to those questions soon enough. But to argue those questions in the here and now is, again in my opinion, pointless.

Do I believe in the Trinity? Yes, I do. Do I understand the nature of the Trinity and am I able to articulate it clearly? Not so much; But I’m willing to trust that I’ll be given the ability to understand all of it, eventually.

For me, the main point of today’s reading lies in the first half of verse 20, where we read, “…**20**and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” If you follow Jesus’ logic, Baptism, then, is only the first step. Learning to obey the teachings of Christ is an essential second step in order to close the loop.

So, let’s talk about obedience. When I hear the word obedience, I tend to bristle. As I’ve mentioned before, I’m a stubborn, fiercely independent and highly opinionated Irishman, and nobody’s going to tell me what to do or what to think. It’s why the folks at the denomination headquarters think of me as a troublemaker. Yet part of being a disciple of Jesus Christ, requires me to put aside that stubborn, highly opinionated part of myself, and become willing to be subjected to a higher authority. It’s actually not that difficult, if you look at the core of Jesus’ teachings. Once you drill down to the basics, Jesus’ teachings are all about freedom for the captives, caring for the poor and marginalized and advocating for justice. That’s it; so why do we, and I’ll include myself here, why do we find it so difficult to obey these simple instructions? And do we really get to call ourselves disciples if we are unable to adhere to these basic teachings of our risen Savior?

What we do here each week is meaningless and without any value whatsoever, if what is done in this hour doesn’t prepare us to move beyond these walls to share the love of God with our community and the world. The prayers we pray, the hymns we sing, the liturgy we participate in; all of these things are meant to prepare us to be God’s hands and feet outside these walls. And if we leave here without being willing to do the work that we’ve all been called to do; the work of freeing captives, caring for the poor and marginalized and advocating for justice, then really, what’s the point of being here at all?

As we prepare to celebrate the Sacrament of Baptism, I’ll take a moment to remind us that the promises we made, or the promises that were made on our behalf at baptism, are not to be taken lightly. God certainly takes our promise seriously and so should we. One of the reasons baptisms are performed during a worship service, instead of in a private setting, is so that we all have the opportunity to renew those promises, in the sight of God and the Assembly, and encourages us to recommit ourselves to a life of discipleship.

Siblings in Christ, may each of us present today, take this opportunity to renew the promises made at our own baptism and our own commitment to the teachings of Jesus. And may we recommit ourselves to being the hands and feet of the Triune God in our communities, in our country and in our world, AMEN