

SERMON
 First Lutheran Church
 Aitkin, Minnesota
 May 31, 2015

John 3:1-17
 Isaiah 6:1-8
 Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen

KID'S MESSAGE – The Light of the World (Spark Story Bible, p. 416)

1. Kids, Nicodemus had lots of questions for Jesus. Some of them were about God. What questions do you have about God?
2. What things do we know about God?

ADULT MESSAGE – Holy Trinity Sunday

When I went to seminary to become a pastor, I thought that I would have all my **questions about God and faith answered**. Instead, I found out that there are a lot **more questions about God and faith than I ever imagined**. This weekend we celebrate **Holy Trinity Sunday**. Wow, what is the Trinity? What is all of this talk about one God in three persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

You may have seen the article in the May 13, 2015 issue of the **Brainerd Dispatch** entitled, "**Poll shows those in U.S. drifting away from religion**." The article reported that the greatest loss to the number of Christian believers comes from the age group known as the "**Millennials**" generation. These are the people born between 1980 and 2000, ages 15-35. The Pew Report research says that "**85 percent of adults were raised in Christian households but nearly a quarter of them no longer identified as such**." It goes on to say, "**While Christianity may have lost ground, many of those who describe themselves as unaffiliated still 'believe in God' or consider themselves to be 'spiritual.'**"

I received an email article entitled, "**Dear Church: An open letter from one of those millennials you can't figure out**." The fellow who wrote the article says that he is in a love/hate relationship with the church. He says he:

1. Loves the **theology**, but hates the expectations of **pseudo piety**.

2. Loves the **gospel**, but hates the **patriotic moralism**.
3. Loves the **Bible**, but hates the **way it is used**.
4. Loves **Jesus**, but hates **what we have done to him**.
5. Loves **worship**, but hates **Jesusy entertainment**.

He goes on to say that he is still in the church. But many of his childhood friends have left. He said, **“I’ve come to find that many of the kids I went to church with were misfits, skeptics, and doubters, too. Some of them still go, but more of them have left.”** He says they left because:

1. The Jesus preached from the pulpit didn’t look much like the Jesus of Nazareth.
2. All the bells and whistles and hooks and marketing rang hollow.
3. They had been constantly catered to, kept busy, but had never been taught how to be a part of the church.

The writer goes on to offer a few things that might bring the millennials back to worship. Considering this **Holy Trinity celebration**, I would like to quote just one of his suggestions.

He encourages the Christian church to **“Welcome the toughest, deepest, grittiest, most desperate, most shocking questions.”** He writes, “We have lots of questions. More and more, what we see in the world doesn’t jive with what we grew up hearing from the pulpit. You have done more damage by requiring politeness, by refusing to engage, by brusquely rebuking honesty and vulnerability. You’re better than that, church. At least you should be. You should be a safe place for struggling, grappling, doubting.

Allow us to be real with each other, to avoid the temptation to gloss over the crap going on around us with easy, tidy, Jesusy clichés. You’ve always taught us that the world is black and white, just like The Andy Griffith Show and I Love Lucy. But, and excuse us for noticing, the world is mostly gray, gray like Ricky Ricardo’s dinner jacket and Barney Fife’s nightstick. Let’s embrace the grayness together.

So no more three points and a take home. No more self-help. No more marriage and parenting advice. No more anger management pointers. We don't need you to be our therapist; we need you to be our church. We need you to grapple with us, to push back. We need you to show us how to be the hands and feet of Christ, to struggle with us in making it more on earth as it is in heaven."

The millennials have lots of questions. Maybe you do too. When I went to seminary I thought that I would have all of my God and faith questions answered. Instead I learned that there are a lot more questions than I ever imagined. **Can we let God be God and admit that we are only human?**

In our first reading from **Isaiah 6:1-8**, the ancient prophet, hundreds of years before the time of Jesus, receives a godly vision. He sees "**the LORD of hosts!**" This vision, Isaiah was convinced, should have led to his fiery destruction. God was understood as being so holy, awesome and pure that no sinful human could look upon God and live. The God that Isaiah saw caused him to cry out, "**Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.**" Yet instead of destroying Isaiah, God forgave and cleansed him. Then God said, "**Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?**" And Isaiah, who had figured that he was **as good as dead in the eyes of God**, soon **became the hands and feet of God** in this world. "**Here am I; send me!**" Ordinary human being, Isaiah saw almighty God, survived God's awesomeness and went on to serve as a light in God's world.

Then when **Jesus, Emmanuel, God among us**, launched his earthly ministry, good old **Nicodemus** approached him with a few questions. Nicodemus was a member of the Jewish governing council and for fear of being criticized by his friends, snuck in to see Jesus after dark. He knew that Jesus was a godly person, but he couldn't understand his teachings. Jesus told him that God's people need to be "**born from above.**" Jesus went on to explain that born from above happens when the **Holy Spirit of God** blows into our lives. "**How can these things be?**" Then Jesus/God gave to Nicodemus the world's greatest and best message ever.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” Jesus did not stop there but continued, **“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”**

So, **Isaiah pictures God as remote and fearful**. Then **Jesus** comes as God who is **intimate and loving**. Finally, the **Holy Spirit of God** literally **comes and takes up residence** in the heart and life of every believer – **our advocate, counselor and guide**. **There is one God**. Yet God visits us in three different ways – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God chooses to come among us and to give us love, life and salvation. We go from the reality of being **mere mortals, doubtful, sinful and fickle** to the reality of being **so precious and beloved by God that God died and rose again and came back to love and claim us**.

Can anyone **explain the Trinity?** No. But we all can **marvel at the Trinity**. We see revealed to Isaiah an awesome, all-encompassing God who deigns to **abide in our world**. We see a compassionate, gentle and totally faithful Jesus who deigns to **die on a cross** in order to **reveal God’s immeasurable love for us**. We see a Jesus who literally became one of us in order to **win victory for us over sin, death and evil**. Then we meet a Holy Spirit who comes like the wind to **take up residence in our very hearts and souls**.

Here’s what our millennial friend is suggesting that Christians need to do. We need to totally **focus upon God, not ourselves**. Instead of pointing at ourselves and how well or poorly we are doing at being good Christians, we need to point at God and how amazing, awesome and mysterious God is. We need to point at how loving, compassionate, forgiving and renewing God is. Our amazing God, rather than fixing us, or waiting for us to somehow measure up or pass some sort of a test, instead chooses us just as we are, and fits us to the task God has in mind for us. God loves, trusts, honors and blesses us as ordinary human beings living and working and struggling in a most difficult world filled with doubts, fears, hopes and dreams.

It is **Holy Trinity Sunday**. What exactly does that mean? I don't know. But I do know that Jesus loves me and you and is moving every day to give us faith, hope and love. Our questions? There is room for plenty of gray area in God's faithful love and embrace.

I know a little boy named **Drew** who believes in God. He believes that **God loves him**. He believes that he is a **part of God's family**. He believes that **God can help him with the "owies" of life**. Please watch a little video clip that Drew's mom, **Tara**, captured a few days ago. (**Show video**.) We get a glimpse of four year old Drew, looking out the window, hands folded, and we hear him pray, **"God, I want that Owie gone please, God. Um, can you please get that away, please? Thank you, God. Amen."**

Drew is starting his Christian life in a very good place – trusting and turning to God. A world-renowned theologian, **Carl Barth**, was once asked by a newspaper reporter, **"Dr. Barth, after all of your years of studying the scriptures, what is the greatest truth that you've learned?"** Dr. Barth's response came, **"Jesus loves me this I know."**

Holy Trinity? Very hard to imagine. Why some little boys have their owies taken away and others don't? Very hard. Why hurricanes and earthquakes? Why wars and violence? Why so many different religions? Why some people are apparently born with different sexual orientations than others? Why the rich get richer and the poor get poorer? Abortion? Suicide? World hunger? Gray. Very gray. But I'm going to keep on believing, keep on asking, keep on welcoming anybody who comes through these doors and keep on trying to be the hands and feet of Jesus in our world... How about you? **Jesus loves me. This I know. And that's enough. Thanks be to God.** Amen.

