

Diversity and Unity: seeking “both, and”

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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I can relate to Nicodemus in the story we heard a paraphrase of today. I am supposed to relate to him – as I am a religious leader too. Nicodemus would have been a very educated religious leader, a Pharisee, according to the storyteller John. He happens to be Jewish, but he could be a leader from any mainstream religion today whose role it is to remind the faithful of their call to live in right relationship with God and with one another.

Nicodemus, though, is different from other Pharisees; he is a seeker – literally feeling around in the dark, and figuratively too. I have likened this experience in sermons before, a walk of faith, being like feeling my way through the hall at home at night. I could be waking in the night, walking from the bedroom to the kitchen to get a glass of water, flailing around. I desperately hope that I won't bump something and make a noise, which would startle our dogs, thus waking everyone in the house.

So, there is Nicodemus, bumping about. Unbeknownst to him, he is going to be taught some radical theology. His traditional knowledge flipped on its head. He has no idea that some day soon he will be helping Joseph of Arimathea to prepare Jesus' body for burial. Life is like that, isn't it? We may think that we have a thing figured out, Then, one day, we gain the insight that we don't, in fact, understand things the way we thought. We encounter mystery at many bends in life, and much as we want answers, sometimes we must embrace mystery.

Nicodemus, the scholar-seeker, stumbles upon a mystery that Jesus teaches, and he must sit with it – puzzle with it. The idea of being born, literally, “from above” or born again. His accountability is to the keepers of the faith, his sect called the Pharisees, and they demand complete compliance to the Law, the Torah. Credit where it is due, in the time that John circulated stories like this one, Judaism was in great jeopardy. The Roman Empire was ruthless, and had no love of any religion, other than Roman rule where the Emperor was God. The Pharisees earnestly committed themselves to keeping the Torah alive in the hearts of future generations.

But Nicodemus seems to understand, here, that there is more to what his faith calls from him. This Jesus, and the mystery about God's nature, is radical. Nicodemus makes a risky decision to listen to Jesus. We might call him the original “lover in a dangerous time” – to misquote I'm sure, a Bruce Cockburn's lyric.

Being born from above (born again) must have been perplexing, as well as the idea that Jesus might have been somehow especially connected to the holy. Then, add to this new teaching, a reference to a Spirit that Jesus says Nicodemus must be born from. The idea of more than one God, alone and in charge, would have been unthinkable to those of the Pharisee sect.

The doctrine of the Trinity emerged in Christianity out of *radical encounter* stories like this in the Christian Scriptures. I am often rather hesitant to say anything about the Trinity, because, honestly, I'm not sure exactly what I believe about it. But, in this time,

this place in life, I'm inspired by this holy mystery. As I hear this story from the Gospel of John again, I feel the creativity of it, as it stretches poor old Nicodemus from his rigid laws, about what I imagine to be a God out there, alone.

I look again at one of my favourite living theologians, Richard Rohr. He sees creativity in the Trinity, and community. The Creator, the Christ, and the Spirit – all together, not a rigid doctrine, but instead he sees a dance.

Now let me say, here, at the first mention of a “dance”, that I am rather rigid at dancing. You could call me a dance “literalist.” Those Pharisees were rigid about the holy, I'm rigid about a dance. Teach me the moves, and I treat it like the cramming for a final exam. Not exactly the spirit of dancing. Well, I think that this awakening for Nicodemus was a bit like that. He wanted simple answer. A fix. A solution to his dilemma.

Don't we all wish we had an easier time figuring out life. Instead, we muddle our way through life, and death, and relationships, coping with our deteriorating health, understanding horrific injustices like those in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan, Haiti, and right at our front doorsteps.

What if – just stay with me for a moment – what if God is not so simple. What about this concept of God, that we hear about one God, one only? But what about God-self being three – Creator, Sustainer, and Spirit. God not as a lonely deity, but as a community. Jesus referring his intimate relationship with God, Abba, Daddy. That is pretty close. Add to that the talk of Spirit and we predictably see one disoriented Pharisee in this story.

Richard Rohr offers a story:

The fourth-century Cappadocian Fathers tried to communicate this notion of life as mutual participation by calling the Trinitarian flow a “circular rotation” (perichoresis – perry-ko-ray-sis) among the three. They were saying that whatever is going on in God is a flow that's like a dance. And God is not just the dancer; God is the dance itself! Then (Jesus as “word made flesh”) becomes a movement outward and downward. Jesus comes forth from the Father and the Holy Spirit to take us back with him into this eternal embrace, from which we first came (see John 14:3). The circle dance broadens; we are invited to join in and even have participatory knowledge of God through the Trinity.¹

You can see why teachings of a one-God-alone would be rather disorienting for a Pharisee in that time. I think that he somehow had a hunch about what he would hear that night, from the Rabbi Jesus. He wanted to break rank with his Pharisee sect that allowed no deviation from the one alone God teaching. I bet that they were rigid dance literalists like me.

There isn't much room for diversity in rigid religion. Just follow, completely compliant. Unified in all ways. Institutional religions have at different periods in history resorted to this technique – enforcing absolute unity, compliance. Christianity certainly did that coming to Turtle Island. As we talk in worship about our diversity as reflecting God's

¹ For more information, please visit: <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/considering-the-trinity-2023-06-05/> (The Center for Action and Contemplation, CAC, Monday, June 5, 2023)

vision, are we being unfaithful? Perhaps in the early times that Christian colonialism took hold this, conversation would have been dangerous.

I hear a lot of grumbling among some in my life, about Canada – how immigration might push this country into anarchy. Too many cultural realities and practices might push us beyond our orderly cultural mosaic of a country. I wonder what our Creator's perspective would be on this? That, I think, is the perspective we need to seek out, even though we know that we are very human, and we will never truly see the world as God does, we can try.

So, today, I wonder if you, like I do, hold firm to various reductive, simplistic, analyses of our world and faith – grounded in fear, rather than in a healthy appreciation of mystery. Perhaps this notion of the Trinity, God as the dance – Creator, Christ, and Spirit all in constant motion, each different, yet part of the unified whole – maybe that Dance image can teach us something new about faithful living.

We are one, yet each of us wonderfully unique, all in movement. The holy circle dance sending us out as we spin with centrifugal force. Then we are drawn in again by centripetal force. We don't have to choose between being unified and being diverse – not forced into being either diverse as community or diverse, but instead, perhaps, we are “both and”, just as we might believe God, Christ and Spirit are unified AND diverse. Amen.