

Homily

Trinity Sunday

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Denver

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Don't start googling 'metaphors for the trinity' online. I was immediately drawn to this poem as what seemed to me an apt description of the divine (as well as similar imagery from 16th-century mystic St. John of the Cross). St. John describes God the Creator as the spring or source, the Redeemer as the flowing river, and though he doesn't specify much about the Spirit, it could either be the water seeping back into the soil, replenishing the source itself, or the water we partake of (from the spring and the river)

Or, as Raymond Carver's poem puts it:

Can anything be more wonderful than a spring?
But the big streams have my heart too.
And the places streams flow into rivers.
The open mouths of rivers where they join the sea.
The places where water comes together
with other water. Those places stand out
in my mind like holy places.

Anyway, it seems that many are quick to dispel any metaphor for the trinity, not because of its mystery, but because they seem to be so certain about what the trinity is to disqualify a particular image because of some specific characteristic. There is a frustrating irony in so many people using

so many words to explain away this most mysterious attribute of the Christian God, this one thing that seems to transcend language and logic.

So, true confession - I don't pretend to understand what God is, let alone how the trinity works. And maybe I'm in good company. Maybe you are, too. Maybe, like Nicodemus from today's Gospel, you also find it puzzling to know what it means to be so in touch with the divine that one can be 'born of water' or 'reborn'.

Perhaps that's why I love this poem - water, too, is a mystery. It's everywhere (60% of our bodies, 71% of our planet), and yet that same planet is at risk for both too much water, with oceans rising and polar ice caps melting, and too little water, with drought and fire as the new normal in California and Australia.

Beyond the practical, though, water is simply wondrous. Its sounds - even in digitally simulated versions - provide a soothing white noise to fall asleep to. Its smell wafting in from the open windows this morning in this very space was reviving. Its seemingly infinite expanse from the point of view of a beach has us contemplating other infinities of time and space.

Carver's poem taps into the utter wonder that we often feel when contemplating water. This is a grown man with a child's eye for the mystical world of nature, almost as if seeing a river for the first time, with the eyes of someone much younger.

The poem does speak for itself, but knowing a bit more about Raymond Carver may help us further appreciate his wide-eyed curiosity.

Carver is known principally for his short stories, and the fact that he's one of those archetypal mid-century White Man writers made me hesitant to choose his poem for today's service. I worried that he had some kind of mid-twentieth century baggage - like so many of his compatriots - that would perhaps prevent his words from reaching us as purely as they seem to have been composed. It turns out that Carver's brokenness actually adds a compelling layer to his poem - his baggage, his burden was alcoholism, so much so that, during a teaching appointment after his first forays into publishing, by his own account he did more drinking than writing or teaching. After being hospitalized several times, and after seeking various treatments, he finally stopped drinking on June 2, 1977 with the help of Alcoholics Anonymous. He called this new period of his life "his second life." Or, in other words, a rebirth.

So, within that context, and with Nicodemus's puzzlement about being born by water, let's take another look at Carver's poem. Is it any wonder that he finds such joy at the purifying, mystifying, life-giving powers of water? Is it any wonder that this renewing source of life makes his blood run and his skin tingle?

Whatever we call God - love, beauty, the way things are, nature - Carver's story reminds us to reopen our eyes to that divine presence, and perhaps to deliberately ask ourselves what else we've been submerging ourselves in instead. For Carver, it was alcohol. For others, it might be addiction to technology, or negative thoughts, or unfair judgment, or crippling distrust or fear. Maybe we've grown so used to social distancing that re-engaging with the world is unexpectedly challenging. Maybe the isolation of pandemic times has drawn out long latent vices. Or maybe it has just been a really long time since you've tapped into child-like wonder.

Carver died in 1988, just ten years after his “second life” began. Carver’s tombstone is inscribed with his poem “Gravy”. (Yes, another liquid!) It starts,

“No other word will do. For that’s what it was. Gravy.
Gravy these past ten years.
Alive, sober, working, loving and
being loved by a good woman.”

and ends:

“Don’t weep for me,”
he said to his friends. “I’m a lucky man.
I’ve had ten years longer than I or anyone
expected. Pure gravy. And don’t forget it.”

During our time of meditation, you may simply choose to re-read Carver’s poem. Other questions you might consider:

When have you felt immersed in the divine?

When has that sense been hard for you to access? Why?

When has water caused you to wonder?

When have you experienced a sense of “rebirth”?