

Character and Choices

Sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
May 30, 2010

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

In addition to being the Sunday before Memorial Day, today is known as “*Trinity Sunday*” on the Christian liturgical calendar. Today is the day in the church year set aside for us to reflect on the idea that we worship and belong to a Triune God - a God in three persons.

The doctrine of the Trinity developed as early Christians tried to make sense of how God was operative in their lives and in the larger world. It came about as they grappled with what exactly Jesus meant to them and how in fact they experienced the reality of God’s presence in their own lives. Recognizing that I am being overly reductionist here, I have come up with a way to grasp the purpose and function of the Trinity. It points to a God beyond us (the Father), who was and is at the same time beside us (in the Son, Jesus, whose life, death, and resurrection give us a glimpse into God’s presence and priorities being fleshed out in a human being). Then finally the God who is beyond us and beside us is also somehow functioning within us. This is the Holy Spirit. I’m not sure my theology professors would be all that excited about how I’ve just described the Trinity, but that’s how I have come to make sense of it.

As you listen to the two brief texts of scripture for today, listen for evidence of the Trinity - God beyond, God beside, and God within us. But more than that, pay attention to how this God shapes our lives. The first passage is a brief piece from John’s Gospel, the 16th chapter. Like many of the other passages I’ve read from John over the course of the past few months, this comes from Jesus’ extended farewell speech to the disciples on the night before his arrest. As you listen to Jesus talk, listen for God beyond, God beside, and God within. When Jesus tells the disciples that all that the Father has is his and that the Spirit will take what is his and declare it to them, I want you to think about the old song. Hear it in your mind. *He’s got the whole world in his hands. ¹You and me brother, you and me sister:* our problems and our celebrations, our triumphs and our trials. Think about a God who has the whole world in God’s hands as you hear Jesus speak. What difference might it make in how we live to understand that God has the whole world, and our whole lives, in God’s hands? *Read John here.*

Our second passage comes from Paul’s letter to the Christians in Rome. As I said last week, many scholars believe that Romans is a letter Apostle Paul sends in advance of his arrival to let the community of faith know what he believed. It is his statement of faith. In this portion of Paul’s faith statement, he is talking about how the God beyond us and beside us works within us to shape us into people who reflect the fruit of the Spirit. When you hear Paul say that he boasts in his sufferings, keep in mind that this is, in a sense, a figure of speech. It is his way of saying “I rejoice in them, I celebrate my sufferings.” Note also that Paul in other places does not shy away from boasting. In fact, he says in one place, “Far be it from me to boast, but if I must boast, I will boast in my weakness.” Ponder why on Earth Paul would boast in his sufferings.... *Read Romans here.*

What is it in your life that has shaped you into the person you are today? Some of who we are is purely a matter of genetics and good fortune. Anyone who has raised more than one child can testify to the fact that children seem to come out of the womb very different from one another. I have one daughter, who came out of the womb a natural extrovert, never met a stranger, and another who came along and

was from the very beginning much more of an introvert. You could see it from the time they were babies. One of them just loved to be snuggled; another was much less “huggy.”

My mother talks about the difference between me and my brother. I was the older child. I came along and what I wanted to do was to please mom and dad. If I messed up, she could look at me, and I would burst into tears. My brother, who came along three and a half years later - well, it took a lot more than looking at Tim. She says she literally pulled her hair out trying to get Tim to mind what she was saying. People are just born with different personalities.

One afternoon a month or two ago, I watched Robert Redford’s beautiful movie based on Norman McLean’s book *A River Runs Through It*. I hope you’ve seen it. If you’ve watched the movie or read the book you know that it is in part a study of how different Norman and his younger brother Paul were. Norman, the older brother, is much more compliant to his father’s wishes. There is a classic scene where Paul, the younger brother, as a young boy decides he is not going to eat his oatmeal. A standoff at the table ensues. Rev. McLean, the father, tells him he is not to get up from the table until he has finished that oatmeal. The boy sits there and sits there. The family comes back to the table for lunch and then dinner, and finally it becomes clear that the strong willed Paul is not going to bend. They say that as a parent you pick your battles. Rev. McLean, who probably could have chosen a better battle to pick, finally caves in. Some of who we are, we just simply do inherit - our natural temperament is part of that inheritance.

Then, as far as inheritance goes, there are the circumstances of our birth. Gene Methvin jokes about how smart he was to pick such good and loving parents. Of course he is kidding. The truth is we don’t get a lot of say in the social class, the economic situation, or the country into which we are born. There are certain opportunities which come to us, or not, simply because of the realities of our family, our class, and our nation of origin. We don’t have a choice about whether or not these inheritances come to us. But we do have a choice about how we respond to them.

We don’t have a choice about what we inherit, including the country into which we are born. But we do have a choice as to whether or not we will appreciate it and serve it. So let me just quickly say on this Memorial Day Sunday that I am grateful for people who have made the choice, over the more than two centuries our country has been in existence, to stand up and defend our freedom. That was a choice.

As I have already said, there is much in life that we simply inherit, there is much in life that is simply part of our genetic code, our natural makeup, and our family or class or country or religious tradition of origin. But one thing we don’t inherit, one thing that doesn’t come to us naturally, is character. That, we have a choice about.

It is this choice that led Helen Gahagan Douglas, the Hollywood actress who became a congresswoman in the 1940s, to say “Character isn’t inherited. One builds it daily by the way one thinks and acts, thought by thought, action by action.”² Did you get that? We don’t inherit character. We build it. We build it through the choices we make.

When the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, he was, in part, writing to them about character and how it gets formed. Paul, who had already endured much opposition and persecution because of his faith, wrote these strange words, “Not only that, but we boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character and character produces hope, which does not disappoint us.”

What an interesting progression - sufferings produce endurance which produces character which then produces hope. So how does character get formed? Well, according to Paul, suffering has something very important to do with it. This makes sense, given that the Jesus who Paul followed endured some

suffering of his own. In order to be shaped into a person whose character reflects the image of God made known in Jesus Christ, we too, somehow must face suffering.

Actually, in this life, we don't have a whole lot of choice about whether or not we will experience suffering. It is coming to every single one of us. A certain amount of pain and suffering comes into every life. All of us inevitably encounter emotional and physical pain. People we love die or disappoint us. As we age, we lose things. Johnny Mercer wrote about this in the lovely song *The Days of Wine and Roses: The days of wine and roses laugh and run away like a child at play, through a meadow land toward a closing door, a door marked "nevermore" that wasn't there before.*³ Now he was talking about the progression of alcoholism, but there are all sorts of things in life that go through that door marked nevermore. Relationships end. People we love die. We begin to lose friends and faculties as we age. It is part of the human condition to suffer.

Lest we look at suffering as an unqualified good in and of itself, it must be said that Paul is not saying in this passage that he seeks out suffering - that he looks for opportunities to encounter it. He is simply saying that when suffering comes to him, he chooses to rejoice in it - rejoice in the midst of it. And he rejoices in it because he sees this suffering as an opportunity to grow in his ability to endure and thereby to build his character and on the heels of that to develop more hope.

Before we go any further, it should be noted that the word the NRSV translates as sufferings comes from the Greek word, *thlipsis*, which literally means pressure. How do we respond to the pressures of life? We all face them. This is the fundamental choice which shapes our character, I believe. What do we do when hardship comes? What daily choices do we make in response to difficulty?

At the church retreat several weeks ago, Flynn Bucy talked to those of us who were there about the idea of spectrum logic, as opposed to binary or dual logic. He said in relation to the different fruits of the spirit, there is a spectrum on which each of us finds ourselves. In other words, I am not either patient or not patient. I am somewhere on a spectrum. I may not be very patient, but I have the capacity to be more patient. Then he said, the question is, "How do you develop more patience, or more love, or more generosity? It is a matter of when things come along that test your ability to be patient, or loving, or generous, do you see them as opportunities to grow, to be challenged, to be tested? Or, do you simply say, 'Well, I'm not patient. I am not loving today.'"

Every opportunity that comes along, every experience like that is a chance to grow: to grow in our ability to endure, to build our character. It is a little like lifting weights. You get stronger in your ability to lift weights as you progress through different levels of resistance. You don't start by lifting 300 pounds. You begin with smaller weights, and the more you work with smaller weights, the more strength you develop to lift heavier ones.

I have a friend who talks about ADGOs: another darned growth opportunity. When hardship comes along, can you look at it as an ADGO? Another growth opportunity.

As we look at these hardships that come along as growth opportunities, we grow in our ability to endure. Here again is another Greek word for you, "*Hupomone*". Hupomone does not mean simply endurance, which is the way it is translated, but it literally means to bear up under. Think about these growth opportunities as a chance to develop our faith muscles - to get a little stronger; move up on the faith spectrum just a little bit more, a little bit more. That is what ultimately leads to the development of character.

Character: the word translated character in the Greek is “*dokime*”, which meant to be tested and approved. It was used of metals that had been refined. After the metals had gone through the refining process they were tested, approved: *dokime*.

I love the old story of the silversmith who heated and refined his silver until he finally removed the dross and impurities. He knew it was finished when he could see his reflection in it. The silver was *dokime*. It had character. Sometimes I think it can useful to think of the God we know in Jesus Christ as a silversmith. The work of refining our characters isn't through until the image of God's love can be seen clearly in us.

Last night I was at a poetry party, one that Judith and I offered with John and Gail Niels through the auction. One of the poems I wanted to read, but didn't, was written by a man named William Henley. Henley, at the age of twelve, was afflicted with tuberculosis of the bone. A few years later, the disease progressed to his foot, and the physicians insisted that the only way to save his life was to amputate directly below the knee. It was amputated when he was twenty-five. In 1867, he successfully passed the Oxford local examination as a senior student. In 1875, he wrote this poem from a hospital bed. Despite his disability, he survived with one foot intact and led an active life until his death at the age of fifty-three.

You might recognize this poem from the movie of the same name.

*Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.*

*In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.*

*Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.*

*It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.⁴*

The poem? “Invictus”. Which, in Latin, means what? Unconquered.

At a certain point in the movie, the South African rugby team, who Nelson Mandela has been trying to get the whole country to embrace, even though all but one of them are white. At certain point in the movie the rugby captain takes the whole rugby to Robin Island, where Mandela was imprisoned for twenty years. They look at the tiny cell that Mandela inhabited for all those years. As they look into the cell, the words of Mandela reciting the poem that kept him going are heard.⁵

Unconquered by circumstance. Head bloody but unbowed. A man of character.

One of the things you learn in pastoral ministry is that life simply isn't easy, really, for anybody. The question for all of us is what do we do when life gets hard? Do we let the difficulty build our character, or do we become resigned?

In Jesus' name.

Amen.

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

¹ "He's Got the Whole World In His Hands" is an old African-American spiritual.

<http://hymntime.com/tch/htm/h/e/s/hesgotww.htm>

² Helen Gahagan Douglas in a speech at Marlboro College, 1975 reprinted in her 1982 book *A Full Life*.

³ Johnny Mercer wrote the lyrics to this song for the 1962 movie of the same name, *The Days of Wine and Roses*. Henry Mancini wrote the music.

⁴ William Henley wrote *Invictus*, his most famous poem, in 1875. You can find it in the 1920 edition of *Modern British Poetry*, edited by Louis Untermeyer. Or here: <http://www.bartleby.com/103/7.html>

⁵ The movie *Invictus* came out in 2009 and was written by Anthony Peckham and John Carlin. Clint Eastwood directed it.