

Trinity Sunday 2016

Sermon 5.22.16

Scripture: Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

John 16:12-15

I'd like to introduce you to an old friend—and by “old” I mean we've been friends for a long time but also that she's old. She's as old as anything, really; *older* actually. She's been around since the beginning—Lady Wisdom, God's partner in creation, God's cohort and delight; Lady Wisdom, like a playful child who rejoices in the Lord and rejoices in the Lord's inhabited world and delights in the human race, like a wise architect who establishes all that is, who makes it real.

Come to think of it, though, she might better be understood as having been around since *before* the beginning. After all, this, which some manuscripts suggest she declared, “The Lord created me in the beginning,” is better understood as, “The Lord *acquired* me in the beginning”—and, of course, to have done so, Wisdom needed to be around before the beginning. If the beginning is marked by the Lord's having acquired Wisdom, than she must have been even before. My dictionary, *Women in Scripture*, notices this too. It says, “Surprisingly, wisdom seems to be something even God has to ‘search out.’”

As to this dictionary, it's divided into sections of named women in the Bible, unnamed women in the Bible, and Female Deities and Personifications. The section for named women is 172 pages long, the section for unnamed women is 331 pages long, and the section for female deities and personifications is 49 pages long. This is to say, there are a lot of women in the Bible. Some are dubious characters; some are honorable. Some are examples of weakness and passivity; most demonstrate remarkable strength amidst social circumstances we of this established, stable, genteel society can hardly imagine—the ever-looming threat of violence, the overwhelming task of pregnancy and child-rearing, the need to protect yourself and to be protected and simply to survive. Some would blow your mind with what they managed to accomplish when considered along with what they were up against.

Lady Wisdom isn't someone who faced such circumstances because she wasn't a human woman who lived in the world. She was, as indicated in where she's found in my dictionary, a deity, a personification. Why, then, we might wonder is Wisdom imagined as female? With no historic fact that she was actually female, why understand Wisdom, this

thing of utmost value that was to be sought after, this ideal that was to be pursued more than gold, even much fine gold: why, when personifying this thing, imagine it as female?

Well, why not?

I remember hearing of an ordination once. The candidate was a woman, before my time, so I wasn't there. During the Ecclesiastical Council that happens before an ordination—wherein the people gathered get to question the candidate as to her call, her theology, her experience and her hopes, and of course as to the atonement (there's always a question on the atonement)—one of the people present, an already-ordained minister, and a man, asked the candidate who was in the pulpit and was standing before the gathered congregation, "What do you think you'll bring to the pastorate as a woman?"

I remember hearing that she was really upset at the question. But why, right? It's not so upsetting a question. Indeed, it's perhaps an appreciative question, the assumption behind the question being that, as a woman, you *will* bring something of value to the pastorate. So, what do you think that valuable thing (or things) will be?

But there's also the assumption that men are the standard, and the question as asked does nothing to question that assumption—its givenness, its rightness. There's no questioning of whether we're best served when men are accepted as the standard and women are assumed the deviation, of whether we might be better off if, when it comes to the pastorate or any other formal social role, what's given is that a qualified human will fill the role and the variables are what any particular person will bring.

When I heard about that woman who would be a pastor being asked, "What do you think you'll bring to the pastorate as a woman?" I hoped I'd be quick enough to ask if ever in that same situation—and to ask not in a snarky way but in an honest way,—“First you tell me what you bring to the pastorate as a man, and I'll listen for what will be different about me and what will be exactly the same.” After all, the burden of proof shouldn't be only on me, as a woman trying to get through the gate; the burden of proof should be on everyone trying to get through that gate. The burden of proof should be as much on those who typify the norm as those whose mere existence challenges, alters the norm.

I had a professor in divinity school who, longing to upset the whole identity-politics applecart, called his female students, “students of gender”—the joke being that there were

students (obviously those who are male) and there were students of gender, the ones who are different, the ones who are female.

So, we might wonder, why imagine Wisdom as female?

And we might better wonder, why *not* imagine Wisdom as female?

Trinity Sunday is the only particular Sunday of the church year that has no biblical story to give it cause. Think about it: Epiphany Sunday is when the Magi arrived at the stable in Bethlehem, and also when Jesus submitted to baptism by John, in both stories an epiphany taking place as to who Jesus truly is; Transfiguration Sunday is when Jesus took Peter and James and John up a mountaintop where he would then be transfigured before them, suddenly glowing white and appearing with Moses and Elijah; Easter Sunday is the day of resurrection and Pentecost Sunday is the day when the Holy Spirit is remembered to have come down; and Reign of Christ Sunday, the last Sunday of the church year, is when Jesus is imagined as being throned at the right hand of God in glory. But Trinity Sunday, which is today, doesn't have a story attached. The Trinity isn't an event, it's a doctrine, which makes it an awkward Sunday to celebrate in this sort of church—a "low" church, a church whose liturgy is spare, whose doctrine is served up light (if at all), and whose basis for almost everything in worship is the Bible.

The Trinity doesn't show up anywhere in the Bible. The gospel of John confidently testifies to Jesus and God abiding together; the book of Genesis imagines the Spirit and God creating together; the synoptics remember the Spirit coming down and alighting on Jesus like a dove. But the three are never in the same room: Father, Son, and Spirit. Really, as with Clark Kent and Superman, there's something shifty going on here. Worse, it defies logic—this notion that God is three-in-one, this assertion that Christians are monotheistic but only because God is not monolithic, this notion that pastors the world over are rhetorically contorting themselves in order to explain.

I have friend on Facebook who announced he'd taken a new job teaching Math at St. Joseph's in Pittsfield. "Teachers," he wrote, "send me any and all advice!" Once a teacher, though not of math, I wrote in: "Remember, at Catholic school, 3=1."

Nearly no one got the joke, or at least only one person "liked" it.

Trinity Sunday: if it's not exactly Biblical, and it's not exactly logical (except insofar as it has to do with the *Logos*), why bother with it at all?

I bother with it because it describes a God that pervades all things—as creative cause, as redeeming maker of meaning and value, and as sustainer of timeless persistence and *insistence*. I bother with it because it envisions a God who is essentially relationship, a God whose reality is expressed and felt in relationship, and who then encourages me to imagine my relationships as participating in the will and way of God. I bother with it because it feels true: as I walk through my life, my days, my encounters and happenings, I encounter the truth of three-in-one in ways too numerous, not to mention small and forgettable, to list here now.

Contemplative and writer Kathleen Norris wrote that polarization is an “abiding sin of our age” and “is worse than useless.” “It stifles creativity,” she asserts, “whereas a healthy dose of negative capability, the ability to hold differences in tension while both affirming and denying them, enlivens both poetry and theology. In Christian history,” she observes, “it has sometimes meant the difference between unity and schism, offering a synthesis that provides a third way.” In Christian doctrine, I would add, this might be imagined as Trinity—this web of distinctions that yet holds fast, a matrix that gives unity though not by imposing uniformity, a communion that keeps together “by containing diversity within itself.”

On a lighter note, I continue to believe that *The Lego Movie* was a surprising take on Trinitarian experience and its implications for creation. This will contain spoilers, so please plug your ears if you haven’t seen it and you want the surprise. (It’s a delightful surprise, so, really, plug your ears.) The conceit is that there’s a social movement afoot in Legoland, come from some governmental overlords. The wonderful flexibility of life for Legos is being fixed, set. There’s this thing called the Kragl, and whoever has it can make it so Legos no longer come together to be taken apart to be rebuilt. Instead, the kits are put together as they’re meant to be put together, and then they’re beset with the Kragl and they can’t be undone. No imaginative play: it’s all just following instructions and doing as you’ve been told.

This all gives voice to those actual people in the world of Lego-building (and I would know because I live with two diehards, Jesse and Tobias). In this realm, there are those who buy sets and build them as they’re intended to be built and then set the completed object on a shelf for display. (We at the Goodman house have several such displays.) And there are those who buy sets, build them, and then take them apart, letting the pieces intermix with pieces from other sets so everything is a jumble of potential, a creative chaos. (We at the Goodman

house have a basement filled with pieces from Star Wars sets, the Simpsons, Batman, and odds and ends from when Jesse has bought on eBay Legos by the pound.)

Throughout the movie, there's this fight for control, the struggle over the Kragl, whether to use it to fix things into place or to throw it aside so things can be flexible if courting chaos. And at the end comes the grand reveal, when the animated Legos give way on screen to actual human actors. A young boy has been playing all this time in his own basement, where his father has a lifetime of Lego sets built and fixed and place and now merely admired. The boy sneaks in to take them apart and build new little things, but the father has invested in Krazy Glue, its rolled up tube now reading KraGl. He's going to keep gluing these things together, the son is going to keep sneaking in to transform, and on goes their loving but real tension, until a third player is introduced, at the last shot in the movie, the little sister, a toddler with her Duplo blocks, which she just wants to build up, knock over, and build up again. She has discovered the trove of Legos in the basement and now she wants in.

The basement is this land of creativity and play: it's a land of laws and fixed realities (as God the Father and lawgiver has made), it's a land of transformation and rejuvenation (as God the Son and Redeemer has remade), it's a land of creative chaos and a relentlessly energizing building up and knocking down (as God the Holy Spirit has made history to be).

I bother with the Trinity because it invites a full imagining of what God might be like, of how God might manifest so we can relate to God. You'll notice, I suppose, that Jesus in John's gospel spoke of the spirit in masculine terms—and that's fine, but only if we also remember that sometimes the Spirit is felt and considered as feminine.

It's not often so remembered. Thus my having wanted to introduce you to this, my old friend. If you'd never met her before, if you didn't know of her before this morning, rest assured you're not alone. The people who've come together for our Friday afternoon Bible study, which is focusing on women in the Bible, have been dismayed to realize that there's much more to discover than just Eve and Mary, crucial as those two are to the whole story. Really, there are not only lots of other women to meet (they'd fill a few hundred pages); there is also the divine feminine to consider and with whom to consort.

And consort with us she wants to do. She delights in God. She delights in God's creation. And she delights in the human race. The last time I preached on this text (which I do

every three years) I delighted in the fact of Lady Wisdom delighting in us. It's easy these days to feel down on the human race. It's easy to suspect we're not that good after all—to say nothing of good for the rest of the creation. We've wrecked havoc here. We've forgotten our call to stewardship and our responsibility of dominion. So much of what evidence we've left behind of our having been here is devastation, death.

That's the truth of it. But it's not the whole truth. There is also what beauty and wonder we're capable of. There's also what curiosity and discovery we're capable of. There is also the hope of recovery, the promise of insight, the assurance of forgiveness and transformation and a future that might be full of life—all gifts of Wisdom who calls to us, delights in us, persists among us, provides for us, and reigns as queen.

Long live the Queen!

Thanks be to God.