

“Touched”

Valley Presbyterian Church – June 7, 2009

Trinity Sunday
Rev. John Wahl

Isaiah 6:1-8
John 3:1-3, 11-17

The call of the Old Testament prophet is about being touched. So that he might speak God’s words – and not his own – he is touched on the lips by a hot coal. In this one simple – and seemingly very painful – act, he is met by God, touched by the Holy One. And it takes such a profound, moving experience for him to answer God’s voice calling to him with the words, “Here I am, Lord. Send me.”

A couple of weeks ago I contributed fifty cents towards the Youth Rummage Sale in exchange for a used paperback copy of *The Shack* – the debut novel of William Paul Young, who wrote this book as a Christmas gift for family members. Since then, over six million copies of *The Shack* have been sold in the United States: inspiring an assortment of praise and criticism, a great deal of conversation, and book discussions all around the country in churches of every type.

The Shack is the partially autobiographical story about Mack – a family man who, after an unfathomable family tragedy, encounters God face-to-face. He meets the one and only God in all three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; who are revealed to him – respectively – as an affable African-American woman; a rugged, down-to-earth carpenter; and a mysterious, ethereal Asian woman. Whereas he had previously loved Jesus, feared God, and been mystified by the Spirit, he came to appreciate that all of God’s persons willed and acted in perfect harmony: one God revealed in three ways.

By observing and entering into the relationship between these three faces of what theologians call “the Godhead,” Mack gains insight into his own relationships: with God, with those he loves, and even with those he detests. Through these encounters, he learns about forgiveness, about salvation, and about how God longs for us to overcome life’s tragedies in order to gain wholeness, joy and peace.

While *The Shack* is an imaginative and incredibly moving story – likely my best-spent two quarters in quite some time – it left me wanting more: to be specific, a more radical departure from our human projections of God’s three figures. Since we already recognize Jesus as a male woodworker, the God the

Creator as a loving parent, and the Spirit as a comforter, motivator and guide; I kept hoping that God would break free from the images that are already familiar to us.

But, maybe I am hoping for too much. The mystery of the one God revealed to us through scripture as three persons cannot be fully described by one lone writer, nor with one set of illustrations. While Father, Son and Holy Spirit helps to define the internal relationship within God, these names should not limit our understanding of them. “The Father is the Father, not because God is a male, nor like any earthly Father. We call the first person of the Godhead “Father” because this is what Jesus called him and taught us to call him in Jesus’ name.”¹

Trinity Sunday is one of those times that we can remember the mystery of the One God revealed to us as three persons. For this word, person, refers not to a separate individual, but to a different role – a “persona” – that might be used by an actor on stage. Although distinct in appearance, these “persona” are one in essence, come from the same source, and work together in harmony.

The idea of and the belief in a Trinitarian God – three in one; distinct yet united – has challenged Christians since the earliest days of the church. What it shares with the other great faiths of the world is a description of God in totality: past, present and future; here, there and everywhere; earth, sea and sky; liquid solid, gas. But what sets the beliefs of Christians apart is an appreciation and acceptance of this holy mystery of God revealed in three ways: as Father, Son and Spirit.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus is approached by a man named Nicodemus in the darkness of the night. Why he comes then, we are not exactly sure, but maybe it was because this high-ranking Jewish leader could not publicly admit his curiosity about the wonders and signs which Jesus had performed. What if this man was related somehow to the divine – the one, holy God? And what was being passed through Jesus in order that others could experience healing in their bodies, minds and souls?

In their encounter, Jesus tells this Jewish leader about the need to be born again – to be born from above. But Nicodemus cannot understand. How is that even possible, he wonders? Jesus responds, “if I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?” (John 3:12) How can the nature and relationship of this God in three persons be understood by us when we cannot see past the mundane to get to the mysterious?

¹ Fred Anderson, “The Threefold Nature of God” from *Day1.org*

Phyllis Tickle draws from this famous passage from John to make this claim: “all religions deal in human psychology. All religions likewise offer us wisdom – wisdom that is useable, effective, and of worth to all humankind; wisdom that, because it is sound, is also very similar in substance. But, it is in their mysteries and not their wisdom that religions differ.”²

In almost every major religion – there exist versions of the Great Commandment: to love God wholly and completely, and to love other as yourself. These lay a foundation for religious wisdom, which then relates to human psychology: respecting others, acting with humility, practicing hospitality, seeking understanding, finding fulfillment both in relationships and in solitude, accepting and overcoming loss.

Learning to apply these life skills is an important part of Christian formation, but what lies behind it is the mystery of God. How God is related to us sheds light on the character and composition of God. And so, Jesus tells his visitor, Nicodemus: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

The mystery of the faith lies in the fact that God the Father, gave Christ the Son as a gift for the salvation of the world. The act of giving helps us to distinguish these two persons of the Trinity – Father and Son – although we believe also that they were never fully apart from one another: remaining united in purpose and will. Both the Father and the Son desire our salvation, both participate in our salvation, both love us equally as the means toward that salvation. And, from the time of creation, when the breath of God first entered into humanity and made it whole, the Spirit has also participated in our salvation, for our life depends on that ability to breath: to have God within us even if apart from us, every minute of our lives.

The keys to this mystery of the Trinitarian God of the Christian faith are love and belief. *Agape* love – the type of love used by John to describe God’s love for the world – is not a sentiment but an action that seeks the good for the beloved. God’s intention is never to condemn but to save, that is, to make life whole. Salvation language is health language. God’s health for all the world in all of life’s relationships.³ Love is revealed to us through the mystery of a gift that offers everything to us: healing, wholeness, peace, and joy – but does nothing to diminish or change the love already revealed within the “Godhead” – the three in one.

² Phyllis Tickle, “A Serpent in the Desert” from *30GoodMinutes.org*

³ Paul Hammer in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 3

The second key to the mystery of the Trinity is belief. That sounds easy enough: we cannot see it; no words can adequately describe it; but we are asked to believe it. If you do, the reward is life eternal, but if you don't, then what?

Traditionally, Christians have been called to make a confession of faith: to state their beliefs about God according to a formula such as the Apostle's or Nicene Creed; or at least to proclaim Jesus as Lord and Savior. While this may seem that we are asking for certainty, what is actually required is an embrace of the mystery. Yes, Jesus is our Lord and Savior, but only through a relationship as Son to the Father and in unity with the Spirit. And yet, somehow, their relationship is more than that: it is a relationship of love which seeks to gift us with salvation; as God has since the beginning of creation.

And so, as we come to the Lord's Table this morning, we do so in embrace of the mystery of God: proclaiming – not hiding from – the reality that we cannot adequately or fully describe the God in whom we love and place our faith.

In Phyllis Tickle's words: might "we all – body, mind and soul – come to be like that unto which and before which we bow." May God so touch our lips, and our hearts, that we might be inspired to respond, saying: "Here I am, Lord. Send me." AMEN.