

## OUR PLAY

Texts on Sunday, June 3, 2012

*John 3: 1-17; Romans 8: 12-17*

IN THE EARLY 14<sup>th</sup> century, the Roman Catholic Church set this day, the Sunday after Pentecost, as a festival of the doctrine of the Trinity—"God in three persons, blessed Trinity." Two hundred years later, when Protestants broke from the Church, they abandoned as much of Catholic tradition as possible, including all the festival days. But after we began talking to each other again about fifty years ago, many Protestants began following along with the calendar of church festivals and these colors. Catholics were no doubt happy too, because they got to sing our songs. Before the truce, ♪ *Holy, Holy, Holy* was off-limits for them.

But what is the doctrine of the Trinity, really? And what is doctrine, anyway? Why does it sound so. . . doctrinaire? Doesn't dogma always become *dogmatic*? When you hear people say, "I'm spiritual, but not religious," doctrine is one of the matters they have in mind, for it is more than a little worrisome to a modern mind to be fed what to think, like a menu of foods the church says you must eat even if you can't taste them or digest them. That really sets off our inner two-year old. What about Trinity and all the rest of the things a church teaches? What do you have to believe?

To be a Christian at Riverside, do you have to believe Jesus was born of a virgin? As many of you know, in the 1920s, some years before he began his ministry here, Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick got himself and the Presbyterians into a marvelous snarl preaching *No! You do not have to believe in the virgin birth*. At Riverside, must you believe that the Bible's teachings are infallible? Must a Riverside Christian be born from above, as Jesus put it to Nicodemus? (The scripture does not read: "born again.") At Riverside, must you believe that Jesus is Lord? Must you believe that war is evil and must never be fought? Must you believe that the police practice of stopping and frisking citizens is wrong, as I do? Most New Yorkers don't, polls say. Must you believe that homosexuality is a good gift of God, just as gender and skin pigmentation are good gifts of the Creator? Must you believe that in order to be a Christian at Riverside? Must you believe that to get to heaven, you will need a good answer to St. Peter's first question, which is: *What committees did you serve on at Riverside?*

Let's get some things clear. Not just churches, but every organization has doctrines, or teachings. Some are essential to the body, to its integrity and identity, and some are not. Teachings are considered essential if the church could not survive without them. They are part of its immune system, like a

membrane that admits what is good and rejects what is dangerous. Now, in this great hall, sometimes loud applause affirms the preacher's strongly worded teachings. You could understand if a person *not* clapping felt very uncomfortable for holding a view different from the preacher's. *Is it safe to believe differently here?* she might wonder. *Am I being cast out?* This is not what we want! We must ask, What is essential? That is one question. A second question is even more basic. What is the purpose and function of a church? There is no point talking about essential beliefs unless we have a shared idea about what the church exists to do.

In a few weeks, we will embark on a new sermon series here. We will examine great rifts in our social fabric, where many lives are torn and shrunk-en, yet where the American people have no resolve to mend the tears, so that we might again become *e pluribus unum*—out of many, one. We will think about education, immigration, taxation, employment, food justice, gender justice, poverty, unwanted pregnancy, terrorism, peace, war and more. These will not be lectures, goodness knows, but proclamations of the gospel, as the Spirit gives us utterance. Yet before we step into these paths of inquiry about duties of serious Christians toward fellow creatures, let's clarify what we think a church is for and what is essential, here, for The Riverside Church.

I am going to put forward a few ideas. I hope you will find ways to re-read them and discuss them and add your own—for the first essential of this church is that no one person, certainly not the preacher, tells you what to believe. We discern what is essential together. That is essential—so essential, I think, that if a candidate for senior minister came looking at Riverside expecting to impose teachings, top down, that candidacy would fail, I think—and hope—before ever coming to the congregation's vote. Let's begin.

Is a doctrine of the Trinity essential here? I think Riverside's answer is No—helpful for some, yes, but not essential. The spiritual-but-not-religious side of me was overjoyed many years ago to read in Paul Tillich's *History of Christian Thought* this summary of ancient arguments about the Trinity:

Distinctions in the eternal Trinity are empty. They are words without content, because no perception of any kind can confirm their meaning; hence, it is essential to remember the context which caused these arguments to come into being—mainly, to understand the historical Jesus [in a day when several conflicting ideas of Jesus were popular.]

Tillich pierces to the root: Doctrines—essential teachings—arise from a context where the organization's identity was threatened. They are how the church sets its keel straight after a terrible storm, and then sets sail before the winds of God. Trinity is not essential to this church's safe passage today.

In fact, many in today's churches are what I call Jesus-unitarians; others

are God-the-Father unitarians; still others Holy Spirit unitarians—meaning that one of these traditional Christian images of God, more than the others, has so cooperated in the imagination of this or that individual that she comes alive to faith and hope and possibility mostly through this one name of God. The opening words of one's innermost prayer tell the story. "Father God," says one. Another: "Dear Jesus," "Holy Spirit, heavenly dove," whispers a third. That all these find a home in this church—that matters; that is essential.

The Bible is essential to the church at Riverside, and interpretation of it is essential—but no single interpretation of the words in the Bible is essential here. This teaching is confusing to many people. Some puzzle over why we give our attention to an old book. Others are appalled that we don't pay enough attention to certain words in the old book, like "abomination" or "born again," even though that latter word is not even in the Bible.

For those who wonder why we don't preach from just any book that pleases us, the answer is simple. We are concerned about the subtle working of sin and pride and therefore we intend to be sober-minded about the possibility that what pleases us might not please God—which is to say, might not be helpful to our full humanity. We think that the main purpose of the church is to help us to overcome our small selves; to shed our old shell again and again, and receive new life and grow. This kind of growth is what it is to be born anew from above. This *is* life without end but in God.

Now, as a guide into this life of growth in the Spirit, the Bible is the product of the most extraordinary and exhaustive laboratory testing. In a word, generations have proved its value as guide without equal. Since we intend to trust ourselves to the winds of the Spirit, blowing where she wills, we open the Bible trustingly, expectantly. Now, we also love to feel the Spirit moving in other words and works of art. But we hope that we never think or say or do anything so novel that the word of God has not already contemplated its spirit in perennial wisdom. That is why the Bible is essential.

For those astonished that we think interpretation of the Bible is essential for every one who participates in the community, and yet that no individual interpretation is itself essential, hear John Calvin on the matter from 500 years ago. He said the Bible is a "dead letter" unless God Holy Spirit is present to our reading. Therefore, no human authority, no pope or priest, no preacher or president, can simply say what is so. It ain't necessarily so. You must take your crown. You must invite Holy Spirit to come give light for understanding. And you must do this together. That is essential.

Finally, sacraments are essential. Baptism and communion are essential, but it is essential that we understand sacramental living even more broadly.

Prof. Donald Braxton defines sacramentality as what “builds up the capacity of humans to participate symbolically in the forces on which the health and well-being of their social organism depend.”<sup>1</sup> Is there not then a sacrament of sex for Christians in their family relation? Is there not a sacrament of care in all the paths where we meet—in committees, over coffee, in the heart of a listening conversation? Do we not owe it to offer to one another the sacrament of the fruit of the Spirit, which is “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control?” (Gal. 5:22) This teaching will set our keel straight after the terrible storm.

I like to think of the church as a parable. In a parable, nothing is just what it appears to be. Everything, including our personalities, also is open to be seen (or interpreted) as pointing away from itself, pointing beyond, to what cannot be grasped, but only loved; to God. I am sure you have noticed that religious language is always metaphorical; we can’t say anything high and precious without a reference to something simple. The word “God” comes from “good.” The word “Christ” means “anointed” or “chosen one.” “Spirit” is the Latin word for breath—invisible, ever-present, essential. Why, the word “metaphor” is a metaphor; that comes from root word meaning “to carry beyond.” When it comes to the things of God, it’s metaphors all the way down, as they say.

So let us think of what’s essential in the church this way. Here, we have all sensed an invitation to come together to find out what it is to become more fully human, “to be like Jesus,” as the old spiritual has it. To do that, we need to play together with the toys that are provided. This is the purpose and function of the church: to help us play together with the sacred tools of scripture and the liturgy and the sacraments of love, so that we might learn and grow and be shaped into new beings by forces so wonderful and so present that we can only call them divine. Having learned something of who we really are and how to share our self, we will come to our day of death, ready to let go for good, for God. This is our play.

*Rev. Stephen H. Phelps*

© 2012 Stephen H. Phelps

*The Riverside Church  
in the City of New York*