

Sermon: Church of the Good Shepherd
August 29, 2010
The Reverend Charles James Cook

The deacon, serving in our Sunday Eucharistic worship, dismisses us, sends us forth, at the conclusion of our service, with this declaration: *Go in peace to love and serve the Lord!* We respond, automatically, *Thanks be to God.* We may give those words some thought or we may not. If we do, then we may find ourselves searching for concrete expressions that reflect the practice of peace, love and service, with Christ as the model for all three—what might be termed a Trinitarian formula of Compassion. Peace...Love...Service. What are the real possibilities inherent in all three?

We normally think of peace as the absence of conflict. To live in a peaceful state of being is to live without fear of either being harmed or having to harm another. It is to walk life's path with ease. Christ seems to reflect this understanding when he assured his followers with the words, *Do not be afraid...Peace I give you, my own peace I leave with you.* This comes closer to the ancient Hebrew understanding of true peace that is known as

Shalom—meaning fullness, having everything you need to be wholly and happily yourself. That is what Christ wanted for his disciples, and for that matter, for the whole world. Such is the peace that passes all human understanding. It is the peace we long and pray for with all our hearts, mind and strength.

It would be comforting if the matter stopped here, but it doesn't. Christ offers the other side of the equation: *Do not think that I came to bring peace, but a sword*. On the one hand, the Lord of Life offers the promise of an existence without conflict; and on the other hand, he suggests that this same promise will bring division. It is our task to make sense of, and attempt to reconcile these contradictions, so that we may be helped in representing the peace of Christ to our world. Or to put it another way, "Can there be peace, in the name of the Lord, without conflict?"

The other two components of our "Trinity of Compassion" are *love and service*. Love has been overly sentimentalized in our own time, to the point that Christ would not recognize the term as it is often used today. For him, love carried a deeper dimension of what might be called "going beyond one's own self-interest." *You have to be willing to lose*

your life in order to gain it...No greater love can anyone show than to lay down one's life for one's friends. The distinguished American psychiatrist, Harry Stack Sullivan, has interpreted this to mean that a state of love exists when I engage another person in a manner that reflects his or her life is just as important or more important than my own...or at least of equal value. There is a sacrificial element here in that love demands more than self-satisfaction and security. Love demands more than mere sympathy for another person, but rather demands empathy, drawing us into a deep connection with one another.

There is, of course, no greater Parable of Love than Luke's Parable of The Good Samaritan. We know the story by heart. A traveler is beaten and left for dead by the side of the road. A priest and a Levite pass by on the other side, not taking the time to offer assistance. Then along comes the illegal alien, the Samaritan, who stops and renders aid and comfort, takes the victim to an inn, pays the bill in advance, and asks for nothing in return. He even offers to pay extra if needed. The sacrifice on the behalf of another is evident at almost every turn; the risk ever present—risking that the practice of love will transcend social, cultural and religious prejudices and boundaries.

Traditionally, the interpretation of this parable goes like this: The Samaritan, who brings only difference in so many ways, is the true neighbor, the one who combines both faith and practice. He represents for us, the Christ-like figure in the story, and for centuries, we have been encouraged, in daily life, to imitate him, for in doing so we imitate Christ himself. But there is another interpretation that raises the proverbial theological bar for us, and gets beyond the moralistic, do-gooder, works righteousness that has so often layered this profound story. This interpretation sees the Christ-like figure as the man beaten and left for dead by the side of the road. In tending to this stranger, this vulnerable one, this one left alone, we see Christ—we meet Christ—we know Christ. *When I was hungry you gave me food, when I was naked you clothed me, when in prison, you visited me...for whenever you did these things for the least of these, you did them to me.* And as the writer to the Hebrews reminds us, *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.* If we want to see and know Christ, then we have to broaden our understanding of what love demands, where love beckons us to go, and this usually means going beyond the personal and communal comfort zones that we have erected over a lifetime. And yes, in

such an awakening, there will be conflict—within ourselves—occasionally with others, but mostly within ourselves, because we are most comfortable in loving those who are closest to us, most like us, and most likely to reward us in return for loving them.

The late William Sloan Coffin often wrote of the demands of love in the name of the Lord, and yet he knew how it could lead to something great. *Socrates had it wrong; it is not the unexamined but finally the uncommitted life that is not worth living. Descartes too was mistaken—I think therefore I am—nonsense. (Rather it should be) I love therefore I am. Or, as with unconscious eloquence St. Paul wrote, “Now abide faith, hope and love, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”* Coffin went on to say, *I believe that. I believe it is better not to live than not to love.*

To serve the Lord, to offer oneself for service, the third component of our Trinity of Compassion, will likely be practiced in as many different and diverse ways as there are people in this congregation—some actively, some quietly, some forcefully, some gently, some persistently and continually, and some occasionally and as the moment unexpectedly

appears. You never know when the opportunity to meet Christ on the road might make itself available.

In today's Gospel reading from Luke, Jesus says, *When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. And you will be blessed...* This is the guest list of persons to be invited to our dinner, our banquet, our fiesta of thanksgiving—these are the ones Christ wants us to serve, in his name. Our Holy Eucharist is, in many respects, our banquet celebration, and in some respects, we all fit the definitions of those to be invited—we suffer from various dimensions of poverty—if not materially, then spiritually; we are often not walking in the light but in darkness; and we bring, as human beings, enough personal confusion and disorientation to have more than lost our way. So, in the name of Christ, we can serve one another—here and now. But then there is what could be called the alternative guest list—those who are not here, who do not know to come here, or would if they could, nor do we, at this moment know their identities, and yet we are called to meet and serve them—whatever the circumstance; wherever the place...the nameless beggar at the corner of Fifth and Lamar; the lost soul in the

hospital emergency room with no shoulder on which to lean; the co-worker who means well, but somehow so easily offends; the economically marginalized and impoverished who exist on the benevolence of others and for whom there is often more contempt, in our society, than compassion.

This is a partial look at the alternative guest list; those who are rarely physically present at our banquet table, but need to be served in the name of the Lord. So we must take what we have received—the body of Christ and the Bread of Heaven to them. We do not need to wait for a formal invitation, we just need to go where Christ bids us to go, and remarkably and surprisingly, the opportunities to serve will present themselves in the moments of our daily living. *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.*

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord:

To bear the peace of Christ in this world is not an easy assignment. This earthly vineyard is ripe with conflict, disagreement, anger and fear—and it seems to be increasing with each passing decade. There is a restlessness in this moment in time that could use some rest; some ease. We can expect some conflict and struggle in representing the peace of Christ because this message does not mirror victory through the exercise of power

as we have come to know and understand it, on the world's terms. So, it may very well be that the peace we offer will never be without struggle or conflict—so we have to make sure that this message of peace contains the presence and practice of love. As Paul states, *Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.* The love of Christ, working and in and through us, can overcome all the fear, anger and anxiety that the world can muster, even our own. But we have to risk practicing it.

Dorothy Day once remarked that if we could only remember that each one of us, from the highest royal realm to the lowliest wino, each one is created in God's image—if we could just remember that truth, then it would inspire us to love more. In those she served and cared for, in their faces, she saw the image of Christ. So it is with our service.

Go in peace, to love and serve the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Resources

The Holy Bible. *NRSV.* The Gospel according to Luke: 10:25-37; 14:12-14

The Holy Bible. *NRSV*. The Gospel according to Matthew: Chapter 25.

The Holy Bible. *NRSV*. First Corinthians: Chapter 13.

Coffin, William Sloan. CREDO. WJK Press. 2007.

Day, Dorothy. The Dorothy Day Book.