

A Sermon Preached by The Rev. James C. Ransom

The grace of our Lord, Jesus, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore. Amen.

Pam Wallace, bless her, sent me a clipping this week from the *Sun's* "Ask Amy" column. It was a letter from a person who called him or herself "Non-Believer in Louisiana." "I am 16 and an atheist. I am sure of it," Non-Believer begins. "All my friends are serious hard-core Episcopalians. We're all really honest with each other ... I want to be completely honest with them, but I don't want them to feel weird or disown me because I don't believe in their God. So, what do I do?"

"Ask Amy" is a little astonished that there should be anything like "hard-core Episcopalians," but she goes on to give what seems to me to be the typical response of our society to belief of any sort. Belief, or indeed non-belief, is personal; something that belongs to each individual who can do with it as they please, and each individual belief should be honored and tolerated, even by "hard-core Episcopalians." But then she goes on to say this, "Faith is an extremely important topic, and this is exactly the sort of conversation that people your age should be having, as you figure out who you are and what you stand for." Amy thinks that "hard-core Episcopalian" friends would be a good group with whom to risk this conversation, so she advises, "Non-Believer in Louisiana" to risk it.

Trinity Sunday is the observance on which we reveal ourselves as "hard-core Episcopalians," steeped in an ancient faith, and committed to its classic expressions in the creeds. Today we honor the four centuries of beard-tugging, hand-wringing, name-calling, heresy-defying struggle that our forebears undertook to formulate the Nicene Creed, the hard-core bedrock statement of Trinitarian truth that we affirm nearly every Sunday we worship together. When we hear the Word of God in Holy Scripture each week and struggle to absorb it into ourselves and our lives, we then stand and say this, "Beyond the personal struggle that I have to embrace and live God's Word, there is the faith and expression of the church to which I cling." While every Christian has a need to make faith in God personal, faith itself is not personal, but the community's corporate and centuries-long response to what God has revealed. "We believe in One God in Trinity of persons and in Unity of Being." This truth isn't a personal opinion, it's the way that God has revealed God's self, a revelation that we cannot reject, but commit ourselves to understand and live as best we can.

Yes, Amy, there are hard-core Episcopalians, who stand by and embrace a Christian orthodoxy, or right believing, and its classic expressions. They don't accept faith as individual, but as revealed, and they humbly and haltingly strive to enter into its mystery.

This is the witness of Scripture to us today in the persons of Isaiah the prophet and Nicodemus, who comes to Jesus by night. Isaiah was minding his own business in the temple when, without warning or permission, God revealed God's self to Isaiah. The presence and reality of God was compelling, self-authenticating, and overpowering. Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, Heaven and earth are full of your glory. When God asks, "Whom shall I send" to be a witness to this glory, Isaiah, by the power of the Holy Spirit, responds, "I have seen, and my eyes behold God. I cannot deny this truth. Send me." This was not a personal decision, but instead, Isaiah was drawn into an undeniable truth, an overwhelming reality that pervades all that is so completely that it cannot be denied by anyone privileged to have seen it.

It is by that same Spirit that Nicodemus says to Jesus, "Rabbi, you are the presence of God." Jesus says to Nicodemus, "You are being born of the Spirit, and through my death and resurrection, into the reality of God's kingdom. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Jesus, you see, is God, fully and completely revealed to us in order that by the Spirit, we, too, may be born with Christ into a new and eternal life, into a redeemed humanity. This is not of our doing, but is from God. We are only those who are sent to believe. So for us, it is only by the Holy Spirit crying out with our spirit that we can stand and confess that we are children of God and say, "We believe in one god in Trinity of persons and in Unity of Being." It is God at work in us to God's glory. Nothing more or less.

So, Non-Believer in Louisiana, you have nothing to fear from us “hard-core Episcopalians.” Just as you cannot explain why you do not believe in God, we cannot explain why we do believe in God. God is not a proposition that can be proved true or false. God is not a truth confirmed or denied by evidence. God is not a Good above all others that can be identified and claimed by the will. God simply and gloriously has revealed God’s self to us in Jesus Christ, my Lord and my God, who compels me to say, “I bind unto myself today the strong Name of the Trinity, by invocation of the same, the Three-in-One, and One in Three. Of whom all nature hath creation, eternal Father, Spirit, Word: praise to the head of my salvation, salvation is of Christ the Lord,” as Blessed Patrick taught us to say so long ago.

But Amy is right, Non-Believer in Louisiana. Faith is an extremely important topic, and is exactly the sort of conversation we should be having, because, whether we acknowledge it or not, it is by what we believe that we live; it is by what we believe that we know who we are. It is by what we believe that we know what we stand for. I would risk that conversation with a hard-core Episcopalian any time. We know well the daily struggle to live the mystery of what we believe.

I cannot end without giving thanks for the Trinity Episcopal Korean Congregation, and for their witness to the diversity of the Christian Community. We do not share a common culture, a common cuisine, a common language, a common history. We are not of one people, tribe or nation. But we are of One Faith. We have One Lord, One Baptism, One God and Father of all. We are together a new humanity born of water and the Word, and by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon us. We are One in Christ Jesus our Lord. I can think of no greater witness to the One God who has brought us together than the living witness that in Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, Korean or whatever we are, but One in faith as we stand together to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity, and in the power of the divine Majesty, to worship together the Unity – One God, for ever and ever. Keep us, O God, in this steadfast faith and worship, and let nothing disturb our love for one another in Christ Jesus our Lord.

*The grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with us hard-core Episcopalians forever. Amen.*

As a way to celebrate and proclaim our faith in God, the Holy Trinity, I invite you to stand and sing out that faith as expressed in the ancient hymn to the Trinity, hymn 370, known to us as St. Patrick’s breastplate.