

PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

TRINITY SUNDAY

REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON

“GOD IS....”

John 3:16-18

May 18, 2008

8:45 & 11:00 A.M. Services

Nicodemus was a Pharisee who spent his life studying the Mosaic Law. Jesus did not condemn him for this, but encouraged him to see that God's will is revealed as a gift of love rather than as legal demands and obligations.

The Bible reflects the changes that occurred in the human understanding of God with the passage of time. From the very beginning, biblical monotheism contrasted with the belief of polytheism of other religions. Still later, the prophets' ethical monotheism saw God as having moral concerns for humankind. God did not change, but human perceptions grew.

Bishop Stephen Neill, one of the twentieth century's most prominent Christian leaders, wrote a little book called, *The Christians' God*. The book has been translated into more than twenty languages. Bishop Neill said the title does not mean that Christians should think they *own* God, but that Christians have some distinctive ways of *thinking* about God. The unique aspect of Christian belief is the conviction that God is “*the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*.” It is important how we view God as Christians. This morning, I would like to share with you three things that I believe are vital to our understanding of God.

God is holy.

The word “*holy*” has an interesting history. When it was first used, “*holy*” meant little more than separateness. God is “*holy*” means that God is separate from us and different from us. “*Holy*” things are separate and different. “Bible” means “book,” so “Holy Bible” means a book that is different and separate from other books. Later, as early

humans associated phenomena such as thunder and lightning with God, “*holy*” became a reference to God’s power. God is holy means God is powerful. In the Old Testament it is not until the eighth-century prophets - - Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah - - that God’s holiness was thought of as God’s moral purity or as the goodness of God’s character. This led the prophets to stress the ethical responsibility of God’s people. No longer was it enough to make sacrificial offerings to God, but God’s people were to live in harmony with one another. The idea that God’s holiness is grounded in God’s righteousness revolutionized ancient religion, and transformed it from superstition and fear to a concern for right living. Also, if God’s holiness refers to God’s righteousness and goodness, then God can be trusted. God is holy means God is trustworthy and dependable.

Further, the holiness of God refers to the essential mystery of God. “*God is holy*” means that God is transcendent, “*high and lifted up,*” dwelling in “*unapproachable light.*” God is beyond our capacities of conception and understanding. In the presence of the Holy One, mere mortals are at risk. Moses asked to see God’s glory, but God said Moses could not survive such an encounter. God placed Moses in the cleft of a rock and allowed him to see only the backside of God’s glory. The holiness of God, what is sometimes called the *Godness* of God, is the largely inexpressible quality that evokes awe and inspires worship.

God is love.

In the Bible, of all the qualities that are said to comprise God’s character the highest is love. The ancient prophets used the language of love to express God’s relation to Israel. God is the lover and Israel is the beloved. To the exiled community God says, “*You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.*” (Isa. 43:4) In the New Testament, the relationship of Christ and the Church echoes that of God and Israel.

Of all the expressions of God’s love in the New Testament, none is more familiar than the words in today’s Gospel lesson. “*For God so loved the world . . .*” Because “*love*” is a word with a thousand different meanings, it is important to understand what the New Testament means by the claim that “*God is love.*” Lest we think of it exclusively in terms of feelings, we must remember that God so loved the world “*that he gave his only Son.*” God’s love is not a pleasant emotion, but is self-giving and costly. The cross of Christ is a dramatic portrayal of the love of God. The unique contribution of the New Testament to the understanding of love is found in the Greek word, *agape*. Unlike other forms of love, *agape* has more to do with the will than with the emotions. *Agape* is choosing to love, even one’s enemies. *Agape* is the commitment to love, regardless of

circumstances. *Agape* is love as grace, unconditional love.

Throughout the Bible, we encounter a God of love and justice. What kind of love does not see the neighbor's need? What kind of love is blind to the economic inequities that keep so many families in grinding poverty, or the oppressive social systems that erode self-esteem and destroy hope? What kind of love blames victims for their suffering, while considering one's own prosperity a sign of God's favor? What kind of love refuses to extend basic human rights to those of other nationalities, religions, or races? We cannot read "*God so loved the world . . .*" to mean "*God so loved us . . .*" Jesus said two commandments incorporate all that God requires of us: (1.) Love God with your whole being; (2.) Love your neighbor as yourself. God is holy. God is love.

God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Today is Trinity Sunday. The Trinity is one of the subjects that most seminarians would love to have skipped. As Christians, our God becomes a stumbling-block to many, especially non-Christians, precisely because of what we celebrate today. We learn from history, that the Bible has produced three great monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Monotheism is the belief in one God, unlike polytheism, which is the belief in many gods. Yet, Christianity understands God as Trinitarian or three-fold. God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Muslims consider this teaching a sin against the one and only God. Where did we get the doctrine of the Trinity? It is a good question, because the word "*Trinity*" does not appear in the Scriptures of Christian faith.

There are, however, expressions such as we find in 2 Corinthians, the benediction of which reads: "*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*"

Rather than enter the daunting world of the theologians, let us consider their original intention. Theology is an attempt to express as an idea what Christians have learned through experience. The first Christians were devout Jews who believed in one God. When they encountered the presence of God in Christ, however, and when they experienced the presence of God through the Holy Spirit, they recognized God's different ways of being God. But God is one. Today we rejoice in God's self-revelation to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, whom to know is life eternal.

God cannot be defined in human language. God is "***high and lifted up.***" God dwells in "***unapproachable light.***" God is "***holy,***" and is "***wholly Other.***" These are ways of speaking of God's transcendence and glory. As people of faith, we do the best we can to describe our experiences of God, knowing that all such descriptions will be inadequate.

There is a uniquely Christian identification of God, however. Who have we discovered God to be? God is “*the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*” From this confession comes the Church’s threefold understanding of God as “*Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.*” It is human language attempting to express the inexpressible. When you’ve done your best and your best still falls short, you are beginning to understand the “*unapproachable light*” of an awesome God. If you simply believe that God is..., then, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.