

**ARE YOU LOOKING FOR GOD?
TRINITY SUNDAY**

(06/11/17)

Scripture Lessons: 2 Corinthians 13:5, 11-13
Matthew 28:16-20

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.” (2 Corinthians 13:13)

Today, the first Sunday after Pentecost, is also known as Trinity Sunday. You may have noticed that the liturgical color has changed from the white of the Easter season to the red of Pentecost to green for the season of Pentecost. The scripture lessons for today are the two best-known invocations of the trinitarian formula in the Bible.

In his letter to the church at Corinth, Paul calls on his parishioners to examine their lives. Self-reflection, the desire and ability to reflect on one’s thoughts, feelings, speech, and behavior have always been an important dimension of Christian spirituality. Self-examination calls us to look more courageously, more searchingly, more deeply than one would tend to do in simple self-reflection. It brings to mind step four in the twelve-step process of recovery: the call to undertake a “searching and fearless moral inventory.”

We shy away from this. We find it easier to take other people’s moral inventory than our own. We judge our brothers and sisters harshly and ourselves lightly. We extend less forgiveness and compassion to our brothers and sisters than we do to ourselves. According to Paul, it should be the other way around.

The apostle Paul believed that Christians should be held to a higher level of conduct, and they should hold themselves to a higher level of conduct, a higher moral standard than people who are not Christian. John the Baptist called people to repent as a preparation for receiving Christ into their lives. This is why we include a prayer of confession in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Some churches include it as part of their worship every week.

The kind of self-reflection or self-examination that Paul calls us to undertake doesn’t have to be scrupulous or obsessive. It can be a healthy part of our Christian spirituality. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, recommended that twice a day we prayerfully undertake

what he called an *examen of conscience*. He suggested we stop what we are doing around the middle and again at the end of the day to reflect on our thoughts, feelings, words, and actions, to hold them up against the bright light of a developed and mature Christian conscience.

This practice eventually came to be known in the Roman Catholic Church as the “examination of consciousness.” In an examination of consciousness, at least twice a day we should stop to reflect, to examine our life with the goal of becoming conscious of where we have experienced God in our day. Think how seldom we do this in the busyness of our day, in the busyness of our lives. Think about how important this type of prayer could be to deepening our spirituality, our experience of the presence of God.

But what if we were to undertake an examination of consciousness and not find God? What if we searched but failed to find any evidence of God in our daily life, in our daily activities, even in our relationships? I dare say many of us might have this experience. This startling realization might lead us to reflect on how we expect to experience God, where we look for God, where we encounter God, and where we experience ourselves as being encountered by God. It would hopefully challenge us to find God in more and more places in our lives, in more and more places of life. It would hopefully lead us to reflect on why we had adopted a picture, an image, an understanding of God that was so small, narrow, or limited that, even when we searched, we could find no evidence of God.

One of the first books on Christian theology that I encountered as an undergraduate student was the Anglican theologian J. B. Phillips’s book *Your God is Too Small*. This book opened my eyes in relation to religion, God, and my own faith. It challenged me to think about the picture I had of God and whether this image, this understanding was really of God. It led me to begin the process of thinking outside the little box into which I had confined God, to discover a bigger, more vital, more dynamic, and more real God in life and in my life.

Listen to the titles of the first eight chapters of J. G. Phillips’s book. They identify pictures of God that many people have, that many people (including ourselves) may hold. Although there may be an element of truth to each of these pictures, to each of these concepts,

none of them captures the fullness of God. Each, with its limitations, may prevent us from discovering God in our daily life. Phillips lists these pictures or concepts of God as follows:

- I. *Resident Policeman*
- II. *Parental Hangover*
- III. *Grand Old Man*
- IV. *Meek and Mild*
- V. *Absolute Perfection*
- VI. *Heavenly Bosom*
- VII. *God-in-a-Box*
- VIII. *Managing Director*

Do any of these concepts of God sound familiar? If so, your God may be too small. Actually, this might be a good book for us to read this fall in our Spiritual Exploration Reading Group, now that we have finished the Hindu classic *The Bhagavad Gita*.

The apostle Paul calls his parishioners to the spiritual discipline of self-examination. This self-examination can be more than simply taking our moral inventory, as important and helpful as this is. It can also lead us to become more conscious of God's presence in our life. This is the spiritual discipline to which Paul calls his parishioners. He tells them that this is what it means to be a disciple of the Way, a follower of our Lord Jesus Christ. At the close of the letter he blesses, anoints, and dedicates them through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

In this trinitarian formula, which serves as the benediction at the close of our worship service every Sunday, Paul is making a theological statement about the essence of God. He is telling us that God is three, yet one. He is also opening our eyes to three different ways we might experience God, three ways we might recognize the presence of God in our lives. We can experience or recognize God as creator, as savior/healer, and as guide to our spiritual journey.

If we fail to see God in life or in our daily life, it may be because we are not really looking for God. We are looking for something else. I find this to be the case with many people who declare themselves atheists. When I ask them why they are atheists, they say that they do not believe there is an elderly white man with a long white beard seated on a throne just above

the clouds. The picture they have of God is a picture that J. B. Phillips would say is too small. On the basis of their understanding of God, they are actually correct. There is no large white man seated on a throne above the clouds. Even if such a personage existed, it would not be God.

When the Buddhist says that the Ultimate Reality is Nothingness, I agree: it is no-thingness, since God is not a thing among other things in the universe. The Buddhist affirmation of what they call the “creative emptiness” may be helpful in prying us away from our attachment to idols or false images of God. However, as a Christian, I believe that if they went a little deeper they might discover the Unity that underlies that emptiness.

If you look and think deeper, I promise you that you will discover God in life. Then you will discover God in your life. Any time we fail to discover God in life or in our life, we should assume that we have an incorrect or limited picture of God. We do not need to throw God aside, as the atheist does so proudly. We just need to look and think on a deeper level.

Some time ago I ran across a saying by Huston Smith, the philosopher and scholar of world religions who taught for many years at MIT. Professor Smith has suggested the following characterization of people’s beliefs:

To the atheist, there is no God.
To the polytheist, there are many gods.
To the monotheist, there is one God.
To the mystic, there is only God.

I believe the difference between these various religious positions is primarily a matter of levels. I can understand why atheists come to the conclusion that there is no God, at least the way they define or understand God. If the atheists’ depiction of God were the correct one, I would agree with them: such a small and limited being does not exist.

I can understand why polytheists believe there are many gods. The ancient Greeks saw the divine, personified as their gods and goddesses, in many experiences of the psyche. The Hindus, like us, have a concept of the trinity: they believe God is three yet one. The One underlying the three is Brahman. Brahman appears, incarnates, or is experienced as Brahma the

creator, Vishnu the preserver, and Shiva the destroyer. All life arises from the interplay of these three divine forces, these three parts of God.

The monotheist focuses on the One who is beneath the various manifestations of the divine in life and in our life. To be a monotheist is to affirm and experience the unity that underlies the diversity, the multiplicity of life. It is not that this theological expression is true and the others are false. The monotheist is just thinking, seeing, or experiencing on a different level.

This morning, on Trinity Sunday, I would like to encourage us to be trinitarian monotheistic mystics. Remember, if we were to undertake an examination of consciousness and were to find no evidence of God in our daily life, it may be because we are looking in the wrong places, thinking on the wrong level, or picturing a God who J. B. Phillips would say is too small. So let's think big! Let's see, find, and discover God in so much of life that we come to the conclusion that God is not separate from any part of life! This is what it means to be a mystic.

Most Christians are trinitarians. We believe in a God whom we experience as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If we describe this God in terms of functions instead of as persons, we say we believe in a God who is our creator, who is our savior/healer/teacher, and who is our inner guide. When the apostle Paul used this trinitarian formula, he was opening the people of Corinth to a bigger picture of God, a deeper understanding of the ways in which God intersects with life.

The mystic does not see God as separate from life, creating it from the outside. The mystic sees the entire universe as the incarnation of God. All sentient beings, everything that exists is an incarnation, a manifestation of God's magnificent and benevolent self-expression. The mystic affirms the scriptural declaration that "heaven and earth are full of Thy glory."

If we could think like a mystic, we could discover God in a stone, a flower, a tree, a little animal, and in each and every one of us. We could even discover God within ourselves. The apostle Paul says, "Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?" (2 Corinthians 13:5) If we can see and experience Christ within us, how could we conduct an examination of consciousness and come up empty handed?

Jesus tells us that inasmuch as we have ministered to the least of our brothers and sisters, we have ministered to him. This means that he is present in our brothers and sisters. He also tells us that when we are prejudiced or judgmental or act in a hateful manner toward our brothers and sisters, especially those on the fringes of our society, we are turning our back on him. This is because Christ is in each and every one of us, even those who are despised by society. If we see Christ, if we see God in our brothers and sisters, how could we conduct an examination of consciousness and not find any evidence of God in life or in our daily life?

So this morning, on Trinity Sunday, I encourage us all to think big. If we stretch a little bit we can experience God as creator, as savior/healer, and as inner guide to our spiritual journey through life. Then if we stretch a little bit more, if we stretch enough to think of ourselves as mystics, perhaps some day we will be so aware of the presence of God in life, so aware of the presence of God in our lives that we will not have to conduct an examination of consciousness, because when we do, like the mystic, we will find nothing but God.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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