

Understanding God
Revelation 4:1-11 & John 16:12-15
June 12, 2022
First Presbyterian, Luling

At the Presbytery meeting Friday afternoon, we examined two people to be ordained into ministry. They each had written a Statement of Faith, which was published for everyone to read. One began his faith statement with this: "Foremost of my beliefs is that I can be wrong."

It is probably a good idea for every preacher everywhere to begin every sermon with that same sentence. I can be wrong. I have been wrong, I will be wrong, I'm probably fixing to be wrong right here in this very sermon. Because today is Trinity Sunday, and I'm going to attempt to say something about the Trinity, and that is a topic about which it is very easy to be wrong. I was trying to explain all this to one of the kids last night: you know, the idea that God is one God, and yet three at the same time, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. She looked at me for a minute, then attempted her own analogy that included a tree and oxygen, and then agreed that this was a tricky sermon.

I can be wrong. So can anyone else. Any number of people have tried to explain the Trinity and fallen into several pits. It's easy to err on the one-ness of God. And equally easy to err on the three-ness of God. Easy to create bad analogies.

The most common way to be wrong, I'm coming to believe, is to try to explain, or even understand, the Trinity in the first place. I can be wrong about that, too.

St. Augustine, an early church father said, "If you have understood, then this is not God. If you were able to understand, then you have understood something else instead of God. If you were able to understand even partially, then you have deceived yourself with your own thoughts."

If you think you have understood, it is not God. It's interesting to me that we pretty readily accept that we will never fully and completely understand another person. Even if that person is our spouse, or partner, or parent, or child, or sibling. There are always some part or parts of another person, no matter how close we are, that we will never understand. And we're ok with that. I'd even go so far as to venture that there are parts of ourselves that we don't fully understand, and no matter how much introspection we manage or counseling we

receive, there are parts of ourselves that might just remain a mystery.

So why would a person think that they could ever fully understand or explain God? Yet we try. We know that God knows us completely and fully, and we somehow seem to have the expectation or feel pressure to understand and know and explain God, as if such a thing could ever be possible for a mere mortal, even if God has made us “a little lower than God” and “crowned us with glory and honor,” as Psalm 8 in the Call to Worship says.

Jesus himself says to the disciples in John, in the passage Beth read, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.” One of the roles of the Holy Spirit, as we talked about last week, is to be the Spirit of truth, say those things to us, at a pace we can bear them. I suspect that speed is turtle-like, and will take an eternity to complete.

And if that didn't convince you, the reading from Revelation surely should. That vision of the throne room of the holy is not meant to be understood. It is not meant to be explained. It is meant to be experienced. Based on Isaiah's vision, it is meant to evoke awe and wonder and reverence and what the old translations called “the fear of the Lord.” It's meant to sustain our hope and faith in the utter mystery of God. “If you have understood, then this is not God,” remember?

Yet we persist. I get up here every week and try to understand God and share my understanding in a way that means something to you. Some weeks I do that better than others. And I can be wrong, of course. I know by the questions you ask and the responses you have to Scriptures and sermons that you do the same: you try to understand God and articulate it in a way that makes sense to you and maybe to other folks too.

Why do we do this? We're doing theology, which is just putting words together about God. Why does it seem like humans are compelled to attempt the impossible, to understand God, in all of God's Trinitarian mystery?

The only answer that makes sense to me—and remember, I can be wrong—is that we are compelled to understand God because God made us that way, and because God understands us. God created us and filled us with questions and wonders and limited us with words and language. God created us and filled us with the desire to be in relationship with the Holy, to reach out and seek to understand. And at the same time, God also desires that same thing, to be in relationship with humans, to reach out and help us understand.

We seek to understand God. God already understands us. God is an understanding God. I can only imagine that God takes delight—and no small measure of amusement—at our attempts to understand God. There are things

about God that we can know and understand, in the person of Jesus Christ, through the work of the Spirit. But those things that we can understand are only a piece of who God is.

I can be wrong. You can be wrong. And that's ok. We're limited and finite beings, trying to grasp a wildly free, eternal being. Within the embrace of an understanding and loving God, we seek to understand the holy.