

(Romans 5:1-5 NRSV)

¹ Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³ And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

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In a Glass Darkly

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge,
Massachusetts

Date: June 10, 2001

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Text: Roman 5:1-5

In that famous passage from another of Paul's letters, his first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul says, "For now, we see through a glass darkly." Actually, he says, "gar apti di esoptrou en anigmati." That's the Greek. When you translate it accurately, neither the word 'glass' nor the word 'darkly' are there. It really says, "For now we see in a mirror in a riddle." Evidently, the translators of the King James version of the Bible used their own experience to guide their translation. They knew glass mirrors. But most glass in the 1600s was impure. It was dark and apt to be somewhat opaque. So they said, "... through a glass darkly." They understood Paul to say that in the present world we see things only darkly and opaquely, meaning that later on we will see things more clearly. Like much of the King James Bible, this translation was lyrical and continues to create vivid images for its hearers.

And I have no real quarrel with the King James translation. It captures much of what Paul was after. Mirrors in Biblical times were actually made of bronze. But bronze mirrors, like their later British glass counterparts, gave dim and distorted images, so the meaning stays roughly the same thus far. Glass mirrors and bronze mirrors gave imperfect results. Both might be said to have rendered dark images.

The Greek, though, says nothing directly about dark images, though. It says that looking in a mirror is to look at a riddle. It is a riddle because the image is not precise. It is dark. It is rippled (at least in ancient mirrors it was). Even the finest Corinthian bronze mirrors left a great deal to the imagination.

So, why all this history lesson and talk about ancient language? Well, I am hoping it helps Paul's idea come alive. When Paul talks about what we understand in the present day, he wants us to believe that we see things, things we can recognize, things we know, things that are certain we recognize – like our own reflections in polished brass – but also things which we cannot quite apprehend entirely, things which we cannot fully understand, fully get our minds around, or fully put into words. Things which remain riddles to us, mysteries.

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A mystery, then, is something we can see. We can reach out as if we could touch it. But it remains always a little beyond our grasp.

If ever there has been an idea in our Christian life together which qualifies as a mystery, it would have to be the Trinity, the God which is one, but at the same time three. The triune God, three co-equal parts, but one substance after all. Father, son and Holy Ghost. Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit. Choose either the old or the more current formula; it is still an enigma.

But, despite how impossible it seems to penetrate, describe or agree on its full meaning, the Trinity has been a central doctrine of those who would call themselves Christian. Throughout the history of Christianity the greatest theologians have taken their hand at making sense of it. Ancient Councils have tried to define it. And arguments over its meaning have led to all manner of schisms and charges of heresy. Try to find agreement about the meaning of the Trinity, and you will fail. Try to find someone to describe it to you, and you are likely to see them throw their hands in the air. If they try to tell you about it, you will probably throw your hands into the air. And, yet, even today, across the various branches and denominations of Christianity, baptism by one church is generally accepted by all the others, so long as one was baptized in the name of the Trinity.

So, why is this mystery which no one can seem to nail down so important? One might suppose that the answer is that it is important because it's in the Bible. But actually it's not in the Bible. The Trinity doesn't actually appear as a concept until about 180 in the writing of Theophilus of Antioch. However, it is true that there are some beginnings of the idea in the Bible. Jesus is called the son of God sometimes. And the Spirit is mentioned a few times, but it is never really defined.

So, if the Trinity isn't really in the Bible, why did become so important. The answer has to be that it is one of the things that early Christians had experience of. The Trinity has to be one of those things that people could see, could experience, could almost reach out and touch, even if they could not grasp it fully, even if it was like looking at a riddle in a brass mirror. Paul points to this as-yet un-named reality in this morning's passage from another letter of his, the letter to the Romans. Paul says that we have peace with God. He says that we have access to that through Jesus Christ. And he says that God's love has been poured through our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

To put it another way, early Christians were grappling with the reality, the experience of God's activity in their lives in three different ways: One, as a transcendent God, God who creates the universe but is above and away. Two, as an incarnated God, God who in Jesus was fully human, who was one of them. And three, God who is a present Spirit, an imminent force, a close-by companion with them in every moment, through whom they experienced God and God's love. As

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Frederick Buechner would say, the Trinity means that the mystery beyond us, the mystery among us, and the mystery within us is the same mystery.¹

The ancients were looking for a way to describe the profound experience of the divine, which they had actually tasted. That God was multifaceted was something the oldest scriptures had already hinted at. Already in the Hebrew Bible there was God who in the beginning created the heaven and the earth, who in Proverbs sat out at the gate of the city in the person of Wisdom, and whose Spirit swept over the face of the water.

The idea of God's many faces, the many ways of running into God, was nothing new in the religion the Christians inherited. But Jesus gave the question a new urgency. What were they to say of Jesus? How did he fit into the picture? They had experienced something most extraordinary in Jesus. How could they incorporate what they encountered in him into their definition of God? And how could they do it without backsliding away from monotheism, the insistence on the one God? For by monotheism the Israelites had painstakingly differentiated themselves from the old universe of a thousand Gods. How could the Christians make sense of this many featured reality of God and yet maintain the holistic unity of God they also experienced. The Greeks' Olympus and the Canaanites' fertile valleys teemed with autonomous deities whose capricious and jealous ways made for great mythology but who did little to describe a coherent universe. The Jews and the Christians knew God with many faces, but they also knew God who was not a house divided.

Suffice it to say, the Christians landed on the Trinity as their metaphor. And while there would and still does continue debate about exactly what the Trinity is, the original insight that it is a riddle should warn us from trying to carve the definition too finely. Maybe the mystery beyond us, among us and within us – which Buechner talks of – is enough. And maybe most of all we are to remember that it is meant to capture our experience with the holy. Long before it became a doctrine, it was a way to name the mystery of the many faces of the one reality of God. And that exercise we might still pursue.

Years ago, I and my family spent parts of the summer on an island off Maine's coast. One of the other people on the island was a skilled amateur astronomer. He had a lovely reflecting telescope. One night he invited me over to look at the sky through the glass, glass through which one definitely saw clearly rather than darkly. As a small boy I had longed over the telescopes pictured in "Popular Mechanics." I had imagined myself an astronomer. It didn't work out that

¹Buechner, Frederick, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, Harper and Row, 1973, p. 93.

way, and I am just as happy about that. But this opportunity to gaze through a good telescope was something I had waited a lifetime for.

I was to come over at about 10:00 o'clock in the evening. I remember thinking that the time seemed quite late, but said fine. At 10:00 I arrived, out on a knoll, with the full night sky domed above us. I looked at the western sky. It had a dimly lit glow, as if there were lights just over the horizon. My friend looked and then said, "That's why I had you come at 10:00. There is so little light pollution here that even now at 10:00 o'clock you can see the light of the sun in the western sky.

Later on the whole bowl of the firmament became black except for the stars. When you've heard them described as diamonds in the sky, it's not exaggerating. I had never before seen a fully dark night sky, a sky into which no earthly light penetrated. I remember looking through the telescope – at stars that to the naked eye looked like one star, but in the telescope you could see it was actually two or three stars blurring together. And at planets, and many other things. But in the end, it was not those views which took my breath away. What took my breath away was the black canopy sparkling with sequins. It was the milky nebula of our galaxy. And it was the profound awe in knowing that I was looking at but the tip of the iceberg. Long ago in philosophy studies I learned that you can't prove God by what you think God made. But that night looking at the stars, I wasn't very interested in proof. Like the explorer who happened upon the Grand Canyon, I had the distinct sense that I had stumbled into God's workshop. I knew I was looking at the handiwork of the first person of the Trinity, even if I could not say exactly what I meant, or prove it either.

I met Jesus through one of his brothers. In those heady days of the early 1960s that I first heard the booming preaching voice of Martin Luther King, Jr. In 1963 I read his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." Every word of it struck like a knife. And these words cut deepest of all:

... when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son who is asking: "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"

Martin Luther King, Jr. fought long and hard for a dream of another kind of world. In those years, many, black and white, fell to swords of bigotry. And he, too, on April

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4, 1968 fell to an assassin's bullet at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. And on the wall they have placed the words, "Here cometh the dreamer. Let us slay him and see what becomes of his dream." They come from the Bible. They are the words Joseph's brothers taunted him with when they left him to die.

I met Jesus through Martin Luther King, Jr. because I through King I came to understand the dreams Jesus had and the price he paid for having them. I learned that such dreams are in fact made of the material of God. I learned that such dreams and such dreamers are God's embodiment in the world. And I learned that the incarnation wasn't just an event of 2000 years ago, but our birthright, too. We are born in God's image, the Bible says. C.S. Lewis has observed that our task in life is to be a little like Jesus because that same substance which was in him is in us.

The Spirit in a way is the most elusive of the three parts of the Trinity. I have known it as that palpable presence that was so profound that I could almost feel its weight, but which was also so light that it threatened to take me off my feet. Probably the most obvious encounter I have had with the Spirit was when I felt called to the ministry. I was just sitting there minding my own business. And then there was a voice, not a spoken voice, a felt voice. I think I experienced it as the presence of Jesus, calling me just as surely as he called Andrew from the boat. "Follow me," it said. The pull was irresistible. "Follow me." I wasn't exactly sure of where this would all lead, but the third person of the Trinity, the Spirit has often played a subtle role in guiding that course since. I experience the Spirit as a surprise. Unexpected smiles, undeserved love, unanticipated doors and windows opening. I think I can't explain it very well, but my guess is you know what I'm talking about – those times when something moves you, sustains you, guides you, loves you, cajoles you, and takes you where you never would have gone, that's the Spirit.

The Spirit is perhaps the most subtle. But it is as profound as the others. And as the folks who tried to describe the Trinity understood, they are inextricably interrelated. The Spirit feels like Jesus calling. Jesus points to the greatest idea of creation: the realm of God. And I feel the holiness of the transcendent God in my very material belly. There is a genius in this one and three. There is also a riddle. But whatever it is, and however hard it is to describe, the most important thing is this: the Trinity is but our attempt to describe our experience of God "in whom we live and move and have our being." It is not a doctrine by which our faith should be tested. It is an attempt to describe our most profound experience. Amen.

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