

Non Sequitur Sunday (Trinity B) (John 3:1-17)

Defining the Trinity is absurd.

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My father-in-law's favorite cartoon strip was *Non Sequitur*, by Wiley Miller. The strip takes ordinary absurdity and turns it into hilarious absurdity. It helps us take ourselves a bit less seriously.

If a non sequitur were an animal, its head would not match its tail. If a non sequitur were a song, its first note would bear no relationship to its last. And if a non sequitur were a conversation, you would be eavesdropping on Jesus' clandestine conversation with Nicodemus.

Trinity Sunday is a heavy lift for preachers. While all other church festivals and holy days mark events, Trinity Sunday is all about an idea. An indefensible, unverifiable, seemingly inchoate idea that has animated the church for centuries.

God is three. God is one.

God is undivided. God appears everywhere.

God is now. God has always been.

If ever there were a non sequitur, Trinity Sunday is it.

That's why Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus is such a fitting text for the day. Nicodemus, a Pharisee, has witnessed Jesus at work: teaching, preaching, healing, exorcising. No doubt it has been fascinating to watch Jesus. And, as a Pharisee

whose life's work is to interpret texts and teachings in a contemporary context, Nicodemus is probably OK with things being a bit out of the ordinary. (Pharisees were unlike the Sadducees, who were the originalists of their day. Sadducees held tightly to traditional interpretations and ancient practice, believing the law to be static—rather than a living thing, as the Pharisees saw it.)

But even Nicodemus, open to ideas and eager to learn, is stumped by Jesus' circuitous answers to his straightforward declarations and clearly relevant questions.

"We know you are a teacher" is met with "one needs to be born from above."

"Can a person crawl back into the womb?" is met with "the wind blows where it will."

Flummoxed, Nicodemus sighs, "How can these things be?"

My guess is he intends to end the conversation there, to return to his cell and ponder. But his rhetorical question is met with even more unrelated information: earthly and heavenly things, ascending and descending, serpents and the Son of Man. At the end of the text for Trinity Sunday, Jesus lands the *coup de grace* of non sequiturs: *the Father loves the Son so much, the Father sent the Son to die.*

Though Jesus has a bit more to say in Sunday's Gospel reading, Nicodemus is silenced. Stunned into silence, perhaps? Confused beyond comprehension? We don't know, because John, the Gospel writer, doesn't say. Jesus gets the last word on Non Sequitur Sunday, and along with Nicodemus, we are left shaking our heads.

As we prepare to preach, perhaps we could adopt Nicodemus's willingness to wonder. Though writers as esteemed as Augustine and as creative as Madeleine L'Engle (*A Wrinkle in Time* is all about the Trinity) have taken a whack at it, God as Trinity cannot be satisfactorily defined.

Trinity Sunday can be regarded as biblical Mad Libs, ecclesial fill-in-the-blank. "God is . . ." And that is where our uncertainty starts.

Except there is no uncertainty—only absurdity, on our part. After all, doesn't it strike you as absurd that we would attempt to name, to define, to corral the One who is both before and after, everywhere and here, singular and multiple, without gender, race, age, or address?

Nicodemus has it right. He walks away believing, having to be satisfied with the question that hangs in the air, "How can this be?"

Blessing to you on this Non Sequitur Sunday.