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Sermon 30 May 2021

Title: No Fear for the Father's Family

- Good morning church, it is a pleasure and a privilege to be with you this morning on this Second Helping Sunday—we'll be meeting tonight at the church for our Second Helping Bible study at 6pm—we'll also be on Zoom—but if you're joining us at the church, remember to let us know because space is limited.
- Today is what we call "Trinity Sunday"—that's the Sunday after Pentecost, and after which we enter a long period of "ordinary time" on the church calendar—a period of ordinary time that stretches all the way to Advent, which begins on the 28<sup>th</sup> of November this year. As Bob Dylan said, "The Times, they are a-changin'." Bob Dylan turned 80 years old this week, by the way.
- But I'll tell you, even though we call that period from now until the end of November "ordinary time," it need not be simply "ordinary" or "boring" or "mundane," and in fact I think that in 2021, ordinary time is going to be "extraordinary." I believe that in our ordinary time we are not simply going to see a return to "the way things used to be," or to a "new normal"—I believe that we are going to see things happening beyond what we could ask for or even imagine, and I hope that you are as excited as I am to see what God has in store for our church, for the church in our community, and all across the world. Extraordinary times are ahead of us, and even though this can be a time of uncertainty and anxiety for some, we need not have any fear of the future if we are led by the Spirit.

- Next Sunday, as you heard Pastor Tasha mention, the LargsNaz Community Cafe will begin serving its weekly Sunday brunch at 11am at the church—and here in the online worship service, we will be following suit by starting a new sermon series called “Food for Thought,” that will run for 6 weeks, until the middle of July, and in which we’ll be looking at several passages of scripture that, in one way or another, involve food—and there are an awful lot to choose from—in the Bible there are feasts and famines, there’s forbidden fruit and the Last Supper, there’s manna from heaven and there are dinner parties and miracles involving the feeding of multitudes, and there are plenty of parables about growing food—and we can’t cover all of them in 6 weeks, so you’ll want to be sure and join us to find out which ones we DO talk about—I am sure you’ll find this series edifying and satisfying—“Food for Thought,” starting next week.
- But today is Trinity Sunday, a day when in the church we celebrate the Christian doctrine of the Trinity—the idea that God is triune, that there are three persons of the Godhead—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
- Now the doctrine of the Trinity is one of those theological subjects that seems a little scary to some folks—and that fear is understandable because it’s easy to get bogged down in the details—the history of the doctrine of the Trinity is full of discussion and debate about how the three persons function and what their essence, or the stuff that they’re made of, is—one of the early debates about the Trinity took place in the year 325 at the Council of Nicea, that’s where we got the Nicene creed, and that debate was about whether the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit were made up of the “SAME substance,” or of “similar substance.” The Greek for those two terms is “*homoousios*” that means SAME substance—and “*homoiousios*” that means similar substance—and the Council decided that the three persons were made of the SAME substance—

*homoousios* and NOT of similar substance, *homoiousios*—now you might think that’s an awful nit-picky distinction to have a debate over, and I guess you’d be right about that, but if you said “there’s not one iota of difference between *homoousios* and *homoiousios*,” you’d be wrong about that, because if you look closely the difference between those two words is that Greek letter I, and that’s called an iota—and that may be where we get the expression “not one iota’s difference” from—the Council of Nicea and their debate over the doctrine of the Trinity.

- And that is a good example of the way a discussion about the Trinity can get bogged down in details and specifics—and if we’re not careful, sometimes theological discussions can get in the way of the proclamation of the gospel—
- As I was preparing for today’s sermon, I came across some good advice. Now you might be surprised to hear it, but I do look at commentaries and preaching notes and guides and in one of the preaching guides I was reading this past week, a very wise instructor had this to say to preachers getting ready to preach today—they said:
- *It is not the task of the preacher on Trinity Sunday to explain the Trinity. Resist the urge to find the perfect metaphor to explain God in a way that satisfies everyone listening. It won’t work. . . . all our metaphors reduce the immensity of God into something comprehensible and therefore something less than the true nature of God.*
- Let me read that again-- *all our metaphors reduce the immensity of God into something comprehensible and therefore something less than the true nature of God.*
- That’s a powerful reminder isn’t it? All our efforts to say “the Trinity is like this” are going to fall short because the Trinity isn’t like anything else—the majesty and mystery of the triune God, the Creator God who, though eternal, stepped into history and took on flesh and blood and emptied Himself even to death on a cross and by the power of

the Spirit was raised up again—that's not something you can find a simple metaphor for, because that's not something that's "like" anything else, and even though we may search for ways to describe it, they are always less than perfect and we are driven to find another and another and another.

- There's a cartoon on YouTube—it's been there for almost 10 years now, and it's been viewed well over a million times--and it makes the rounds on social media every now and then—especially around St Patrick's Day and Trinity Sunday—but it was produced by the folks at "Lutheran Satire," and in this cartoon two 5<sup>th</sup> century Irish villagers are talking to Saint Patrick—and they ask him to explain the doctrine of the Trinity—but they remind him that they are simple people—they don't have the theological training or the education that he has—so he'll need to keep it simple. Well, St Patrick tries to explain and they don't get it, and so he uses some analogies—some metaphors—ways of saying "Well the Trinity is like this or like that." But each time St Patrick tries to use an analogy, like "the Trinity is like the way water can be ice or liquid or vapour—or like the way the sun produces heat and light"— each time Patrick uses an analogy, the two villagers point out the way that it represents some heretical view like Arianism or modalism—it turns out that the two villagers know more theology than they let on—and finally Patrick gets so frustrated that he just rattles off a detailed and complicated creedal statement about the Trinity and the two villagers say, "Oh, well why didn't you just say that to start with?"
- It's pretty funny, and I've edited it down to only 2 and a half minutes, so I thought I'd share it with you.
- VIDEO

- We will not be “explaining” the doctrine of the Trinity today—we can certainly dive deep into that subject at tonight’s Bible study—but this morning there will be no searching for the perfect metaphor, the simplest analogy, with which to illustrate it, nor will we be dissecting the daunting theological minutiae of the substance and function of the Three Persons of the Godhead---So there’s no need to fear.
- However, I believe we will see that we cannot think about what the Apostle Paul is saying in these 6 verses in the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of his Epistle to the Romans without thinking about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and as we consider what Paul had to say to the church in Rome, and to the church today, I believe that we will come away with a deeper understanding of how Jesus and God the Father and the Holy Spirit work—and what the triune nature of God—means—really means—for each of us as individuals and for all of us as the church as we respond to the call of the good news of the gospel—as we live by faith
- So let’s begin at the beginning of our scripture for today in verse 12—Paul writes: So then, brothers and sisters,
- Now let’s back up right here—the Greek that is translated as “So then,” here in the NRSV is translated as “therefore” in the NIV—the Greek word is *ara*, and it is a word that is used after describing a situation and before pointing to a conclusion—in logic it might be used in a syllogism—that’s an argument like this: All people are mortal; Socrates is a person, ARA—therefore, or so then, Socrates is mortal—or another everyday example—I am hungry, there is food in the fridge, ARA—therefore, I’m going to get something out of the fridge and eat it. So Paul is about to present the CONCLUSION that follows from the premises he has laid out previously—and so he uses the word “*ara*,”—therefore. My friend Pastor David Gallimore says that anytime we see the word “therefore” used in

scripture, we ought to find out “what it’s there for”—that is, we ought to see what Paul has said just before he uses the word “therefore”—we ought to find out the basis of the conclusion he has come to.

- And if we look in the verses preceding verse 12 in chapter 8, if we go back to the beginning of chapter 8, verse 1, we read—there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus—therefore—it’s that word “*ara*” again—Paul is drawing a conclusion based on what he has said before chapter 8—and if we look back before THIS chapter, we find again and again that Paul says, “*ara*,”---“therefore, and “so, then,” as we go back through the verses and the chapters, through chapter 7, and chapter 6, and 5 and 4 and 3 and chapter 2, all the way back to chapter 1—because in today’s passage of scripture, Romans Chapter 8 beginning with verse 12, Paul is still making an argument that he began at the very beginning of the epistle—and way back there, after his introduction, he says in verses 16 and 17 of chapter 1, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith.’”
- And for 7 chapters Paul has been building layer upon layer of premises and conclusions, and so we see “therefore” after “therefore,” in verse after verse as he expands upon the idea that “the righteous will live by faith” and explains to the church what LIVING BY FAITH is all about—and all of those layers have brought us to verse 12 in chapter 8 where Paul says, “So then—*ara*, therefore--, brothers and sisters, we are debtors (we are obligated), not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—we have no obligation to the flesh— 13 for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

- Now just for a little while I want to think about how what Paul is saying here in verses 12 and 13 is connected to what he has been saying for the 7 chapters before this—and then we'll we move on to the other verses in today's scripture.
- And I want to talk about verses 12 and 13 and the verses that follow by highlighting 3 words—today is Trinity Sunday, after all, so three is the order of the day—and each of these words begin with the letter “F,” and the first is this: flesh.
- Paul tells us here in verse 12, “you are debtors not to the flesh”—you are not obligated to the flesh—for if you live according to the flesh you will die—
- and living according to the flesh is contrasted with living in the Spirit—Paul says “if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.”
- Now we said that for the past 7 chapters Paul has been expanding on what it means to “live by faith,” and “living by faith,” he has said again and again, is contrasted with living by works—but here in verse 12 of chapter 8 Paul contrasts the life in the Spirit with living according to the flesh—
- And it's important to notice here that living according to the flesh is not ONLY living according to one's sinful nature, it is not ONLY being driven by or in bondage to our appetites and desires—being selfish and IN SIN—simply living to satisfy the fleshly nature—but you'll notice that Paul ALSO talks about the LAW of sin and death—so that “living according to the flesh” as opposed to “living according to the Spirit” doesn't only refer to being driven by sin and not caring about righteousness—it can also refer to the bondage that one can be under who tries to earn one's own righteousness by living up to the letter of the law, because it cannot be done—it's like searching for the perfect metaphor for the Trinity—it is an endless quest—and that's particularly true when the Law is filtered through authorities like the Pharisees who have little interest in worship

and a lot of interest in distinguishing themselves from those who are unclean or unlawful—and Paul had been one of those zealous persecutors who made it his business to find those who weren't living up to the letter of the Law and to get rid of them. We still have folks who think and act like Pharisees in the church today, unfortunately

- And so Paul reminds the church that what happens through Jesus and the work of the cross FULFILLS the Law, so that we are no longer in bondage to it, but we can walk in the Spirit rather than in the flesh—we are under grace and not the LAW of sin and death
- Now does that mean we are free to sin as we please? Not at all, Paul says at the beginning of Chapter 6, but what it does mean is that we do not follow the law, or do good works, or love our neighbours SO THAT God will love us—but BECAUSE God loves us—we do not do good SO THAT we may be forgiven and righteous and holy, we do good BECAUSE we are forgiven and righteous and holy—
- and Paul goes on to say here in chapter 8 that because we live according to the Spirit and not according to the flesh, we need not fall into fear— verse 15: For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear-- and that's our second "F" word—fear-- we need not fall back into the fear that we are not doing the right things, the things we need to do to earn our salvation, the fear that we are not trying hard enough, or that God is out to condemn us if we don't prove that we are worthy or deserving of His love—no, we do not have a Spirit of bondage or slavery or fear because we are not led by our own wills, by our own attempts at righteousness, by our own strength and our own works—our own FLESH--we are led by the Spirit who leads us on the path that is right as we surrender to God's will—and when we are led by the Spirit we need not fear.
- Back in South Carolina, on the South Carolina District, the Nazarene Campground is located in Batesburg—that's a little town known for not much more than chicken houses

and the Nazarene campground—but anyway at the Nazarene campground there’s a lake, and a tabernacle, and a dining hall and a ball field and swimming pool—and there are dormitories and lots of little cabins that are owned by various families from all over the District, and every summer the South Carolina district has what they call “family camp,” where families and individuals come and stay in their cabins or in the dorms, and there are special services all throughout the day and into the night, and meals together and so on, and activities—sort of like Northbreak here in the UK, except much hotter—much, much hotter and more humid—and oh the smell of chicken houses in the heat and humidity of a South Carolina summer—it’s an unforgettable aroma

- Well many years ago, decades now, I guess, family camp was going on at the campground, and there was one particular family who were staying in their cabin for the week—they had a teenage daughter—and she was staying in the cabin with her parents and her grandparents and her little brother—and late one night after all the services and the fellowship was over, and everyone was either asleep or close to it—this teenaged girl—she was a young teenager, about 15 or so, she decided that she would take a stroll around the campground. She wasn’t up to anything, she just wanted some alone time, and so she set out and spent some time meandering in the moonlight—all by herself—she walked down by the lake and across the ball field and crossed the road to where the new dorms were—and she was headed up the road, up a big hill to where the swimming pool would eventually be built—I’m not sure if it had been at that point—but as she was walking along the side of that road, in the dark, by herself, a golfcart drove up behind her and pulled over beside her—and there were a couple of adults in that golfcart, one of whom was the District Superintendent, and they asked her what she was doing, and she told them-- she was just out for a walk in the night air—and that’s when they told

her that it was getting pretty late, and so they said, “You need to get on back to your cabin.” And she didn’t blink or miss a beat, she said, “No I don’t, do you know who my Daddy is?” She had no fear. In the first place she wasn’t doing anything wrong, and in the second place, she was Mark Alison’s daughter.

- Now I don’t know exactly what happened right after that, but I do know that the story of that fearless girl who said “Do you know who my Daddy is?” has been told many times since then—and every now and then that little girl’s Daddy will ask someone “do you know who my daughter is?”
- But my point is that she was unfazed by her situation, even in the darkness, even in the face of the power of the authorities, she had no fear, because she knew that she was part of her Father’s family. That’s our third “f” word: family.
- And that is what the Apostle Paul is reminding the church in Rome about—he’s saying “Do you know who your Daddy is? Do you remember that you are joint-heirs with Jesus? You are led by the Spirit and all who are led by the Spirit are children of God—and children of God do not have a spirit of fear but a spirit of adoption.”
- And as any adoptive parent knows, that idea of “adoption” does not in any way mean something “less than” or “secondary to” biological offspring—in fact, Paul’s language emphasizes this fact—in verse 3 of chapter 8, Paul writes that God the Father sent “his own Son,” his own “Son”—the root of the word Paul uses there is “*huios*”—it means a son or a descendant—so Jesus is the *huios* of God—and in verse 15 when Paul says that we have the spirit of adoption, the word there is *huiotesia*—*thesia*, to make, and *huios*, a descendant just like Jesus is—the implication is that the relationship to the Father is the same, that of a *huios*, just as Jesus is—not a slave, not a servant, not a stranger or even a friend, but a son or a daughter of God the Father Almighty

- Paul is clear about the implications of this relationship in verse 16, when he writes that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ— But lest we get to feeling too entitled or arrogant because we are sons and daughters of the Father, the Most High, the Everlasting—before we get to thinking, I’m an heir, a descendant-- that means I have an inheritance coming; that means I don’t have to do anything but enjoy the benefits of my status and wait to get what’s mine— no, Paul reminds us that there is sacrifice required of those who are living by faith—Paul writes that “we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—IF, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. IF in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him—there is the promise of glory but there is also the “suffering with Jesus.”
- There’s an English word that means to suffer with, and it’s “compassion”—“passion” to suffer—that’s the word we use when we talk about the passion of Christ—and Paul is pointing out here that to live by faith, to be led by the Spirit, to be a joint heir with Jesus is to live a life of compassion—a life that is wholly given over to the self-sacrificing example of the love of God poured out for the world
- Paul says in verse 15 “when we cry ‘Abba, father’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our Spirit that we are children of God”—that phrase, Abba, father—it has nothing to do with a Swedish pop group—it’s a term of tender endearment--a way of saying “Papa” or “Daddy.” And it is no coincidence that it is what Jesus cries out as he faces the terrifying prospect of trial and torture and crucifixion—as he faces the Passion, the suffering-- in the Garden of Gethsemane in Mark 14:36—Abba, Father, take this cup from me—yet not what I will but what you will.

- Paul is telling the church that we too have that kind of intimacy, that kind of relationship with God the Father as well—where we are led by the Spirit even when we are in places of uncertainty and vulnerability-- when we suffer, we suffer with Jesus, we have compassion for those for whom Jesus suffered—and even when the future looks scary, even dangerous, even threatening—we need not fear because we are joint heirs with Jesus—we are living by faith—we are part of the family of the Father
- I remember being in the open-air tabernacle at that campground in South Carolina for so many worship services, those old wooden pews would be packed and the huge fans would be blowing that sultry evening air around—and as we sang the voices and the music would fill the sticky stillness of the night with celebration and praise--and one of the songs I remember singing so often was a song by Bill and Gloria Gaither—I'm so glad I'm a part of the family of God, I've been washed in the fountain, cleansed by His blood—joint-heirs with Jesus as we travel this sod, For I'm part of the family, the family of God
- Are you part of the family of God this morning? You can be. The invitation is open to every single one of us. Because of the sacrifice of the Son, we can be led by the Spirit and become the children of the Father. We can face the future, whatever it holds, without anxiety or alarm. We can say to the world, to the principalities and powers, to the storms and the sufferings, to the trials and temptations, “Do you know who my Daddy is?” There are exciting and challenging and surprising days ahead for the church, extraordinary times, as we live by faith and hold fast to the promise that there is no fear for the Father’s family.