

May 30, 2021

“Two Great Mysteries”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

1 Corinthians 15:51-55; Selected verses from John 15 & 16

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Here are some numbers for you to contemplate for a few moments: 1,016,823... 405,399... 58,209... 7056... 3... and 1. Let me repeat them: 1,016,823... 405,399... 58,209... 7056... 3... 1. Any thoughts on what these numbers represent?

Well, the first four numbers represent, respectively, those US service members who died in the Civil War, World War II, Vietnam War, and the Middle East War on Terror. And the numbers 3 and 1, well, they represent the Holy Trinity. So why am I telling you this? Well, tomorrow, throughout the United States of America, our country asks us to celebrate Memorial Day. And today throughout Christendom, the church asks us to celebrate Trinity Sunday. And even though the two at first appear to have nothing in common, there actually is a central theme that they share. And that is the “mystery” surrounding them both. That's right, mystery. The mystery surrounding death, and the mystery surrounding our three in One, great God. So let's talk about these two great mysteries.

First, Memorial Day. Memorial Day was established back in 1868, after the Civil War, and was originally called Decoration Day. Over time, the Memorial Day designation became more common, but it's intent was the same. To serve as a day of commemoration and remembrance for those men and woman who died in the service of our country. Sacrificing their lives so that we might enjoy all our many freedoms and privileges. So on this Memorial Day, let's pause for a moment in silence to remember them.

Now Memorial Day has also morphed, in a sense, into a day where we also remember our loved ones who have passed away. For me, this Memorial Day is more meaningful than ever, since my dad passed away just last August. We spread a portion of his ashes on the farm, and the remaining we buried in the family plot at the cemetery near the farm. While there, I walked through that cemetery, looking at the various names and dates on the headstones. And, I'll tell you, cemeteries certainly bring to the forefront that mystery surrounding life and death, don't they? Reflecting on Memorial Day, poet McLandburgh Wilson put it so poignantly, “From out of our crowded calendar, one day we give. It's the day that the *dying* pause to honor those who *live*.” It's the day that the *dying* (that's you and me, friends) pause to honor those who *live*. Yes, Memorial Day is a day to honor those who *live* – in our hearts and minds

and memories, and hopefully, live in heaven with Almighty God. Which, reminds me of a headstone, I heard about in Indiana where these challenging words are supposedly written: “Pause Stranger, when you pass me by, as you are now, so once was I. As I am now, so you will be, so prepare for death and follow me.” But someone going by must not have been so sure, for underneath they etched out this reply: “To follow you I'm not content, until I know which way you went!” Yes, the whole focus of cemeteries, headstones, and epitaphs beg the question of life and death, and what lies beyond. A question and mystery that has been asked throughout the ages.

And so on this Memorial Day, I want to share some thoughts about the inevitable mystery that lies ahead us for all of us – death. Because, in truth, the time for us to consider death is not when death comes knocking on the door, but long before it does. So first, let's consider all the little hints our Creator God gives to assure us of what's to come – life and death, then life again. Look at how each and every day falls into night, but then a bright and beautiful dawn comes – a cycle that continues again and again. How things die in the fall, but then come alive anew at springtime. How a seed is planted, and must die to itself in order to bloom and grow and bear fruit. Or how a child in the womb lives a life without air or light, the very substance of our existence, and then suddenly makes his/her entrance into a brand new, different, but exciting world. Is it so hard then, to imagine that there is another life and another place and form of existence different from what we experience now.

And yet, because we don't know exactly what's on the other side, we fear. And it is fear that is the sting of death. Yet look at all the promises that the Bible has given us that should take away our fears. From Jesus himself: “In my Father's house are many rooms. I go to prepare a place for you and I will come again and take you to myself.” What's to fear there? Or the Apostle Paul, “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no human heart has conceived of the wonderful things that God has prepared for those who love him.” The Apostle Peter, “In his great mercy God has given us a new birth through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.” And Paul again, “Nothing – neither death nor life... can separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” And finally there is no greater proof of eternal life than the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Proof positive that life will continue beyond the grave. So if Jesus has overcome death, then death is no threat to us. It is just a step to the next life. Yes, death may be inevitable, but we need not fear. And if we remove that fear, there is not a one of us that cannot say, "Oh death where is thy sting? Oh grave where is thy victory?"¹

¹ Creedo, William Sloane Coffin

So what does all this mean for us here today? Well, I think Rev. William Sloane Coffin puts it in perspective. He says, "The one true freedom in life is to come to terms with death, and as early as possible, for death is an event that embraces all our lives. And the only way to have a good death is to lead a good life. Lead a good one, full of curiosity, generosity and compassion, and there's no need at the close of the day to fear the dying of the light. We can go gently into that good night." Yes, lead a good life. Which is really not so hard, if we just seek God's will, follow God's direction for our lives, and bear those fruits of the Holy Spirit we talked about last week. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. If we do this, I can assure you that death will not be an enemy, but rather a friendly angel leading us to the One whose highest hope is to say to each and every one of us, "Well done good and faithful servant; enter into the joy of your Master."² And at that point, this particular mystery will be answered!

Now to the mystery surrounding our Three in One, Triune God. First, let me say that the Bible doesn't even mention the word, Trinity. Although the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are mentioned countless times. We heard Jesus today, talk about the interconnectedness of the three. However, as Christianity became more permanently established in the known world around the 4th century, the Nicene Creed and the Apostles Creed, as well as several other creeds, were written to provide Christians with doctrinal statements of belief. Some of these were elaborate statements trying to put into words this elusive concept of what it means for Father, Son and Holy Spirit to be three in one. It was finally St. Gregory the Great, back around 500AD, who first celebrated the Trinity as an entity. Yet, it is confusing, isn't it? Because think about it? Who do you or I pray to for help, or guidance, or forgiveness? The Trinity? Or, the Father? Or, the Son Jesus? Or, the Holy Spirit? More so, how do we explain the extraordinary phenomena of our One God, like at Creation where both God and the Spirit are present, or Christmas where the Spirit through Mary begets the Son, or all the inferences of all three persons of the Trinity around Easter, or the Ascension, or at Pentecost? The answer is, we don't. We just accept them all as representing the great mystery of our faith. Yet mystery is unwelcome because it can intimidate us, suggesting a limit to our capacity to know and understand, and hence to control.

There is a humorous video on YouTube made by a group calling themselves *Lutheran Satire* in which two Irishman engage St. Patrick in a dialog about how best to explain the Holy Trinity. Although at first pronouncing themselves as simple and unsophisticated, the two proceed to demonstrate considerable

² Ibid

insight as they criticize St. Patrick each time he tries to offer an analogy. Like the famous water-ice-steam analogy, or the analogy of the sun, with its fire and light and heat. When St. Patrick tries to liken the Trinity to a shamrock, they stop him and criticize him as a heretic. Finally, St. Patrick gives up and spews off one of those early creeds I mentioned. “The Trinity is a mystery which cannot be comprehended by human reason, but is understood only through faith and it is best confessed through the words which state that we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, neither confusing the Persons nor dividing the Substance, that we are compelled by Christian truth to confess that each distinct Person of the Trinity is God, and Lord, and that the deity of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit is One, equal in glory, coequal in majesty.” The two Irishman, after a moment of stunned silence, respond, “Well, why didn’t you just say that?”

Based on all my research, I can tell you, the Trinity is a mystery and every analogy by which we try to explain how God can be three in one, every attempt to comprehend the unity in which the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit together are one God, ends up in heresy, and every sermon about the Doctrine of the Trinity either confuses the heck out of us or bores us to tears. No, it is not easy to understand the Trinity. But then again, we are not meant to fully understand the Almighty God who said, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, and my ways are not your ways.” So give that, I say, let the mystery be. Just let this mystery be. Amen.