

When Religion Makes Things Worse
A Sermon for Every Sunday, May 22, 2016
Trinity Sunday
John 3:1-17

I'd like to start today's sermon with a test. It's a true-false test, and there's only one question, but it may be the most important question you will ever answer. Ready? Here it is:

Is your understanding of God true, or false?

Several years ago I got to hear Alan Hirsch speak. Hirsch is originally from South Africa. He has worked as a church planter in Australia, and has become one of the leading voices in the missional church movement. I wrote down almost everything he said. But one thing that stood out from all the others: Hirsch said, "If your conception of God is radically false, then the more religious you are, the worse it is." Think about that for a minute. The word *radical* comes from an old Latin word meaning "root," and you could picture it this way: if the way you think about God is false at the root, then the trunk will be twisted, the limbs will be lopsided, the branches will be bent, and the fruit you find on that tree will not be the kind of fruit that will do anyone any good. In fact, it could be poison—bringing death and not life.

All of which makes me want to ask, "Is our conception of God radically true? Is the trunk straight, the limbs strong, the branches full of good fruit?" It's a question I'd like every churchgoer to consider because many of us have spent our lives going to church. We've been to Sunday school and Bible school; we've sat through more sermons than we can count, spent hours in Bible studies and small group discussions; we've been on retreats and mission trips. We should have learned something about God by now, but

what have we learned? Is our conception of God radically true or radically false?

Because if it is radically false—as Alan Hirsch warns—then the more religious we are the worse it is. But how would we know? How could we be sure? In what may be the most important “True-False” test we will ever take how can we be absolutely, positively, one hundred percent certain that our conception of God is true, and not false?

I think that’s the question that got Nicodemus out of bed in the middle of the night, the question that had him up wandering around the house in his pajamas until he finally got dressed and went to see Jesus. John tells us that Nicodemus was a Pharisee, and the Pharisees were some of the most religious people who have ever lived. They had as their motto the words of Leviticus 19:2: “You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy.” But they had interpreted holiness first of all as **righteousness**, which they did by keeping all 613 of those Old Testament rules, and secondly as **purity**, which they did by separating themselves from anything impure or unclean. Jesus, on the other hand, ate with sinners and tax collectors, he didn’t always wash his hands before meals, and sometimes he broke the law by working on the Sabbath day. And yet Nicodemus couldn’t deny that the Spirit of God rested on this young prophet from Galilee, and that the things he did and said seemed unsettlingly true.

He needed to know more.

“Rabbi,” he said, “we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.” It was his way of starting the conversation, of acknowledging that Jesus was onto something. He didn’t come right out and ask, “Do you think my conception of God is radically false?” But that’s the question Jesus answered. “Yes,” Jesus said. “Your conception of God is

radically false. It needs to be ripped up by the roots and replaced with something new. You need to start from scratch, Nicodemus. You need to be born again.” And Nicodemus said, “What?! Can a man enter into his mother’s womb and be born a second time?” But maybe what he meant was, “Are you asking me to give up my conception of God, the one I’ve worked so hard to acquire, the one I’ve spent my life perfecting? I’ve been to seminary, Jesus! I got all the answers when I was there. I sealed them up in logic-tight compartments. And now you’re asking me to open those compartments and conceive of God in a whole new way? I can’t do it, Jesus! It would be like trying to crawl back into my mother’s womb!”

One of the real problems people were having with Jesus in those days—and it wasn’t just the Pharisees—is that he wasn’t what they were expecting at all. They were expecting a Messiah, a political and military leader who would run the Romans out of Israel and restore the nation to its former glory. When Jesus asked his disciples who they thought he was Peter said, “You’re him! You’re the Messiah!” But when Jesus began to explain what kind of messiah he was—that he hadn’t come to conquer and rule but to suffer and die—Peter said, “God forbid, Lord. This shall never happen to you!” He said it because he hadn’t been born again yet. He hadn’t given up his old conception of God, or of God’s Messiah. But on the Day of Pentecost, after he had taken a few deep breaths of the Holy Spirit, Peter began to say that this same Jesus who had suffered and died had been raised from the dead, lifted up to sit at the right hand of God, received the gift of the Holy Spirit, and poured it out upon his church. “Let all Israel be assured of this,” Peter said to the crowd: “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36).

But you see, that's a radically different conception of *messiah* than the one Peter had started with, and he couldn't take hold of the new without letting go of the old. I think that's what Jesus is trying to tell Nicodemus: that his old conception of God won't allow him to be part of the new things God is doing, and that he can't just modify that old conception, he's got to give it up. In another place Jesus says it like this: "You can't put new wine into old wineskins" (Mark 2:22). When the new wine begins to ferment and bubble it will blow those old, brittle wineskins to pieces. You've got to put new wine into new wineskins. You've got to open up those logic-tight compartments and get a fresh conception of God. Jesus says to Nicodemus, "You've got to be born again, friend—born of water, born of spirit, born from above. You've got to let God's spirit blow where it will instead of trying so hard to control it. You've got to learn to follow, not lead." I think Peter got that in the end. The Spirit led him into a true understanding of who Jesus was even as Jesus had led him into a true understanding of who God was.

Which brings us to the Doctrine of the Trinity.

Today is Trinity Sunday, and as preaching professor David Lose likes to say it is nobody's favorite day to preach. "But," he argues, "behind all the convoluted doctrinal, philosophical, and hermeneutical concerns that found expression in the Trinitarian controversies of the third and fourth centuries pulses the more concrete and urgent desire to describe the [true] nature and character of God." In other words Trinity Sunday is that one day each year when the church looks at its conception of God and tries to be sure that it is not radically false, to be sure that it is, in fact, radically true, and we do this by looking at God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As I've suggested, the Spirit led Peter into a true understanding of who Jesus was even as Jesus led him into a true

understanding of who God was. David Lose says, “Perhaps the best way to approach the Trinity, then, is to think of it backwards. It is through the power of the Spirit that we can receive Jesus as God’s surprising and unexpected messiah who reveals to us the gracious and loving nature of the Father.”ⁱ

He focuses on one verse in particular, John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” “What is striking about this verse,” he says, “is that everywhere else in John the word that is translated here as ‘world’—*kosmos*—describes that entity which is hostile to God. So we would not be remiss to translate the opening of the verse, ‘God so loved that God-hating world that he sent his only Son.’” He says, “This verse has profound implications as, according to the Fourth Evangelist, all of God’s work in Jesus through the Spirit is to save us from our own folly and penchant for self-destruction. In fact, as it turns out God has no particular designs or plans for our punishment or rejection. Instead, God only plans and works for our salvation and health. God desires for us only life, life in all of its abundance here and now as well as in the age to come.” In other words, he concludes, what we learn about the Father from the Son through the Spirit, is that “God is, above all else, a God of love.”ⁱⁱ

Now, let me ask all you churchgoers out there: what kind of tree is going to grow from the root of love? What kind of trunk, and limbs and branches will it have? What kind of fruit will it bear? If your conception of God is radically true, then the more religious you are the better it is—for you and for the world. But if your conception of God is radically false, then being religious will only make things worse. And there are some radically false conceptions of God in the world. One of the more popular among

them seems to assume that he *does* have particular designs and plans for our punishment and rejection. This is one of the reasons I led a Wednesday night workshop for my church on the doctrine of the Atonement, trying to understand how the death of Jesus can make us “at-one” with God. It’s a difficult doctrine. I’m still not sure I understand it. But at one point I said to the people who sat there listening, “I’m telling you all this because I don’t want you to be afraid of God,” because there are some theories of the Atonement that can do precisely that.

The worst is the one I’ve come to call the “Virgin-in-the-Volcano” theory. When my daughter Catherine was studying abroad in Costa Rica she took a side trip to Nicaragua and visited an active volcano that her tour guide described as one of the “seven entrances to Hell.” In primitive times the people of that region thought that some angry god inhabited the volcano, and when it would start to rumble they would throw virgins or young children into the volcano to appease it. That’s unthinkable, isn’t it? We reject that as primitive, pagan superstition. And yet there is a theory of the atonement that sounds almost exactly like that. It suggests that our sinfulness so offended God’s holiness that he was on the verge of destroying us, and none of us was perfect enough or pure enough to appease his anger. But then along came Jesus—the sinless Son of God—who offered himself as a sacrifice for our sins. And that did the trick; God was no longer angry.

That may sound familiar to you. It may sound like something you learned in church. But think about what it does to your conception of God: it teaches you that God is angry with you and wants to destroy you, and that the only thing that will appease his anger is the sacrifice of his sinless son. If we were still talking about the god of the volcano we might say that there wasn’t a virgin on earth perfect enough or pure enough

to satisfy him. That in the end he had to give the people his own son, so that they could throw him back into the volcano, so that his anger could be appeased. Can you see how twisted that logic is? And can you see that if your conception of God is anything like that then the tree that grows from that root will be similarly twisted, its branches broken, and its fruit rotten?

But on this Trinity Sunday I have good news!

A Trinitarian theology won't let us get away with that kind of thinking. To speak of one God in three persons is to insist that Father, Son, and Spirit work together, that they share a common purpose. You can't have one person of the Trinity angry with us, eager to destroy us, while another person of the Trinity loves us, and steps in to save us. No, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit work together tirelessly toward the goal of our redemption. As it says in John 3:17, "God didn't send his son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world," and it must mean to save it from something other than God's wrath: I think it means to save it from us. We're the ones who keep threatening to blow the world to smithereens. We're the ones who keep going to war with each other. We're the ones who can't seem to love our own neighbors, much less our enemies. We're the ones who don't love God as we should. And maybe it's because—at the heart of it—we don't love ourselves. We look in the mirror and what we see is not a beloved child of God, but a miserable sinner who deserves no better than death. It's not hard for us to believe that God would be so angry with us that he would want to destroy us.

"Enough of that!" the Father says to the Son. "Go and show those people how much I love them." And Jesus does. He comes and loves us and loves us and loves us.

And some of us can't accept it. We reject it and we reject him. We put him to death on a cross. And he goes willingly, not so God will finally stop hating us, but because he wants us to know that God has never stopped loving us, and that there is nothing he wouldn't do to show his love. Last Sunday afternoon I went to a friend's ordination service, and at the end of the service communion was served. I'm usually up front leading communion. I don't often get to sit out there and contemplate its meaning. But last Sunday afternoon I did, and as I looked down into that little cup I didn't see the blood of sacrifice, I saw the wine of celebration; I saw Father, Son, and Spirit loving me enough to forgive my sins and restore our relationship; I saw the Holy Trinity raising a glass and proposing a toast to our now-and-forever friendship.

Now, you tell me: what kind of tree will grow from that root? What kind of trunk will it have, what kind of limbs will it lift up, what kind of fruit will it bear? Is it the kind of fruit that will nourish the world God so loves, or the kind of fruit that will make it sick to its stomach? This is a "True-False" test, and as I suggested earlier:

It may be the most important one you will ever take.

—*Jim Somerville, 2016*

ⁱ David Lose, Professor of Preaching at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, from his comments on the Trinity Sunday reading for Year B (John 3:1-17) at the [Good Preacher](#) website.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.