Matthew 28: 16-20 June 4, 2023
"Up Close and Personal" Ian Manson

A few years ago, I did a stint of transitional ministry at Harmony United Church in Saint John while they were searching for a new minister. The congregation was then in the process of discerning whether they would become an Affirming Church, and questions arose about what the Bible had to say about such matters. Different views emerged, and one person in particular was really struggling with this issue. So she sent me a video that one of her friends from a nearby evangelical church had sent her of a sermon preached by a popular fundamentalist pastor from the U.S. It identified all the Biblical texts that appear to condemn same-sex relationships - and also outlined all the dire consequences that will fall upon anyone who doesn't obey them. This left my friend deeply troubled. "If the Bible contains passages that condemn homosexuality, then how can I reconcile what the Bible says with a decision to be affirming of same-sex relationships? Shouldn't we be following what's in the Bible?

These are important questions. For the issue of whether everything found in the Bible is literally true, and, if not, what the essential elements of our faith really are - is very important. The word "literal" means "factual, matter-of-fact, objective," and we know that many evangelical Protestants say they believe that everything in the Bible comes directly from the mouth of God. Consequently, the handful of verses that speak negatively of same-sex relationships are seen to be God's final word on the matter and must be wholeheartedly obeyed. At least that's the suggestion.

But do we actually believe that everything in the Bible is "literally true?" One thoughtful person once posed this question to then-radio-host Lara Schlessinger in quite a memorable way. "Dr. Laura" had frequently quoted the Book of Leviticus to support her belief that, to use her words, the "homosexual lifestyle" was an "abomination." This led this listener to ask about how to follow some of God's other laws. For example:

- "Leviticus 25:44 states that I may possess slaves, both male and female, provided they are purchased from neighbouring nations. A friend of mine claims that this applies to Mexicans, but not Canadians. Can you clarify? Why can't I own Canadians?"
- I have a neighbour who insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly states he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself, or should I ask the police to do it?"

- “Most of my male friends get their hair trimmed, including the hair around their temples, even though this is expressly forbidden by Lev. 19:27. How should they die?”
- “My uncle has a farm. He violates Lev. 19 by planting two different crops in the same field, as does his wife by wearing garments made by two different kinds of thread (cotton/polyester blend). He also tends to curse and blaspheme a lot. Is it really necessary that we go to all the trouble of getting the whole town together to stone them? Lev. 24: 10-16. Couldn’t we just burn them to death at a private family affair, like we do with people who sleep with their in-laws?” (Lev. 20:14)

The list of so-called “abominations” goes on - and includes practices that have put me - and perhaps even some of you - on the road to apparent perdition. No, I don’t own slaves. But I do work on Sunday, get what’s left of my hair cut on occasion, and plant more than one crop in the garden. Not only that, I ate shrimp a few days ago, and Leviticus 11:10 claims that consuming shellfish is also a “detestable” practice. What’s more, I fear we’re all in trouble for violating some basic texts from the New Testament. In 1 Timothy we read: “I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man, she must be quiet.” So what have you done? The last four ministers you’ve called have been women, and you continue to have women lead worship here on a regular basis! So, what are we to do?

Believe it or not, this is where the doctrine of the Trinity can be helpful. For in speaking of God as “Father, Son and Holy Spirit,” this understanding of the early church offers us a lens through which to read Scripture and identify the themes and passages that lie at the heart of the faith and are to be heeded. And it does so by making three basic affirmations.

First, it affirms that the God we worship has been involved in our world from the time of creation, has created us in a godly image, and remains integrally connected to us and all living things. This understanding lies at the heart of the Hebrew Bible that we’ve adopted as our Old Testament, and in its pages we find an incredibly diverse collection of stories and texts that describe how different groups of people over the centuries understood God’s word and sought to follow it. Some of them contradict one another. So theologians - Jewish and Christian - have long sought to separate the “essential” elements of faith from “non-essential” pieces of Scripture, and lift up its central implications for faithful life today. And they

do so with the firm belief that God remains lovingly connected to us - just like a loving Father and parent is to a child.

But the Trinity goes on to say that it is Jesus - "the Son" - who is the lens and prism through whom we can best understand who and what God is, and who gave that love new life and meaning. For Christians, God's very essence was and is revealed through Jesus - the Jewish sage and mystic who, as theologian Marcus Borg puts it, was the one "filled to overflowing with God's Spirit." Through his teachings and healing, his word and witness, Jesus embodied God's love and character fully and completely, and thus reveals who and God is and how God would have us live. Love the Lord your God with your heart, mind, soul and strength, and love your neighbour as yourself," Jesus repeatedly said. And he himself did just that by healing the sick, loving those the world deemed sinful, and challenging injustice where he saw it.

But Divine initiative didn't end with Jesus. The Trinity concludes with the affirmation that the Spirit of Jesus - this spirit of love, justice, compassion and forgiveness - continues to live on in new and faithful ways through those who seek to follow and carry forth this legacy. Of course, we are fallible, we make mistakes, we "see through a glass darkly." But thankfully, in spite of these realities, history is full of countless instances where the Spirit has guided, directed and sustained both individuals and communities to share God's liberating and healing love in ways that have made a profound difference.

This, I believe, is the Trinitarian affirmation - that we've been born with a divine love inside of us - that Jesus shows us how to bring this divine spark to full fruition - and that we find meaning, purpose and hope in life by sharing this love fully and freely. And this foundational understanding permits - no, requires - us to reject those hurtful and judgmental Biblical texts that emerged in times when the love of God was neither recognized or experienced, and that continue to cause so much pain and misery today. Jesus' commissioned the disciples to share love, not hate - to welcome and not exclude.

And I celebrate that, throughout its history, the United Church of Canada has done its best to follow Jesus' way. Yes we, along with countless other Canadian groups, governments and individuals, have made serious mistakes over the years. But our denomination has sought to atone for

many of those errors. And, beginning with our 1988 decision to allow openly gay and lesbian persons to be considered for ordination, we've affirmed that all people are children of God who are deserving of love and grace, and who have important gifts to share. This wasn't easy - and we took a lot of flack for this decision. However, we persevered, and continue to make that witness today - through congregations like Forest Hill United that declare themselves to be affirming and that put a rainbow sign on our building - and through our weekly-stated commitment to seeing, respecting and affirming everyone's "true colours." So let's celebrate and give thanks for the radical and inclusive love of God - Creator, Christ and Spirit - source of Life, Wisdom and Love.

Prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Holy One, you reveal yourself in many ways, and we call you by many names.
But, through the witness of prophets, the life of Jesus, and the power of your loving Spirit,
We know that your mercy is boundless, and love for us is endless;
And so we bring before you our prayers and petitions.

For peace that calms our hearts and saves our souls,
and for peace in the whole world and throughout creation,
We pray this day.

For the ministry of this congregation, for our friends at ***,
and for all other congregations
who bear witness to your love and grace in these challenging times,
We pray this day.

For our country, our leaders, and all those in public service
That their work may be inspired by a genuine love for all people, that they remember that we are called to be our brothers' and sisters' keepers,
We pray this day.

For the whole of God's creation in its beauty and bounty,
for the wellbeing of every creature and their habitats,
And for a willingness to change our ways to protect places and people at risk,
We pray this day.

For the sick, the suffering, and the isolated,
for victims of violence, refugees and captives,
and for our protection against all affliction, danger, and distress,
We pray this day.

Hear us now as we pray in the words that Jesus taught us:
The Lord's Prayer