

**Tools****Trinity Sunday, Year B****May 30, 2021****The Rev. Scott Walters**

One of my COVID self-improvement projects has been learning how to sharpen. Some of you know I used to make my living as a carpenter. But if your image of my former self is of a calm, aproned furniture maker in an immaculately organized workshop...I'm sorry. We must not have met.

My tools were made for job sites, usually houses. So, my chisels were made to be beaten on with a framing hammer and sharpened with a belt sander, since they were bound to run into 16 penny nails and worse from time to time. That is to say, these were not delicate instruments.

But this spring I bought a set of finer chisels. My son gave me new sharpening stones for my birthday, and, since then, I've been learning things like how to hold a blade at just the right angle to get it properly sharp and how coarse or fine a stone to use for the task. I'm not very good at it yet, but I'm better than I used to be. And, as an almost translucent shaving curls from the edge of the tool, I know that a kind of knowledge is making its way into my hands that can't be gotten any other way. A tool is only known in the act of putting it to use.

Now, for this sermon illustration to be helpful at all, it can't remain an overly precious made-for-PBS tableau. So, please note that, even if you call in a professional to install the lightbulbs in your lamps, you use tools. If you've ever wielded a broom or a shoe horn or an egg beater or a pencil sharpener for yourself, you know something about tools. And whether or not it's ever occurred to you, you also know that a tool is only known in the act of putting it to use.

You see, you might hold a lot of information about something in your head. You could read on the box they came in that my new chisels are made from tempered chrome-manganese steel and have hornbeam handles. But that has little to do with whether you could use one to cut a mortise. Or, you might have memorized the wiring schematics of your Kitchenaid mixer and the RPMs of each setting, but that doesn't mean you can produce a decent loaf of bread with it.

Knowing *about* a tool isn't the same thing at all as the knowledge that comes from putting it to use. And today, on Trinity Sunday, I want to suggest that the same is true about the words Christians use about God. We come to know what they mean only as we put them to use, trying to reach the One to whom they point.

This may seem fairly obvious to you. But there are at least a couple of potholes we Christians drive into regularly on the road to God. One is that we think we must be in the right lane if we've got our terms right. Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Three in One and One in Three. Got it. As if God set up the universe as a riddle and the humans who figure out the real name of God are rewarded with everlasting bliss, and the ones who don't...well...not so much. This is the "Reading the description on the back of the chisel box and thinking you're ready to host This Old House with Bob Vila" mistake. We only learn the meaning of Christian language about God as we put it to use in our search for God.

There's another pothole over on the other side of the road, though, that's at least as deep and that Episcopalians especially tend to hit. An Episcopal priest like me is likely to get all misty eyed on Trinity Sunday as he begins mumbling about just how inadequate our words for God are. He'll remind us that God is a mystery and maybe also that we therefore have to learn to be comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty and paradox... Sound familiar?

Well, that's also all true, as far as it goes. But I don't start telling you about my chisels by telling you about everything they can't do, do I? I don't wax beatific about how inadequate they are to the task of ladling soup or sewing a button on your shirt. So, why should it be so when it comes to our language about God? Why should we be satisfied to say that we just can't say?

Wouldn't it be more helpful to admit that, like almost any tool worth learning to use, it's difficult to use our language about God *well*. Which doesn't mean we should drop it and walk away from the project altogether. It means we're going to need lots and lots of practice and a wise community of patient mentors who possess knowledge that's been passed down to them across generations. It means we'll have to use this Trinitarian language over and over again, in all kinds of situations and circumstances in our lives and that there's no shortcut for all this ordinary practice. Then deepest meaning always arises within it.

It's long fascinated me that the verse in the New Testament that young Christians memorize as a tidy synopsis of the good news is embedded within a mind-numbing exchange with a Pharisee named Nicodemus. If anyone reads this conversation and thinks Nicodemus is being obtuse, I don't understand you. And the notion that John 3:16 is a clear formula for personal salvation seems deeply untrue to this passage. If anything, Jesus seems determined *not* to let Nicodemus rest in an easy understanding of what God is doing in the world.

Not only that, the language he uses is all about things we can't control. Like birth. We don't coach unborn children not to go breach and to tuck their shoulders just so when the contractions begin, do we? We don't control the wind either. So, to make sure we don't miss this point, Jesus combines the metaphors and says, "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." This is not an encounter we'll be in control of if we just get our belief or our terms right.

But Jesus isn't satisfied to consign all that's going on to a vague mystery either, is he? What emerges is a strange but very vivid description of the God Nicodemus has come looking for. The God we can even begin to see how Trinitarian language means to help us apprehend.

We hear Jesus tell of the God who gave his Son to the world. The God he calls Father at other times. But there's also all this water and birthing going on, which, last I checked, is very much a mother's work. And the Spirit of this God is blowing where it will through it all. A presence we cannot summon or predict, but that he wants us to believe in, even if it hasn't arrived for us quite yet.

So, it's not that Jesus doesn't give enough description of the God we can never fully describe. It's that he gives us too much and refuses to take details away to make the God they point us to easier to comprehend. This Father God, who births us into a new way of life through a Son, like a breath of wind from nowhere is harder to comprehend, but may be all the more enticing. Because if we are really not in control of when or how we might encounter this God... this other kind of kingdom... maybe the work of faith is to stay close by so we'll be there when it comes near, or comes more fully into view.

Which, by the way, is one of the few things John lets us know about Nicodemus: that he stayed. Whatever else it may have done, Jesus's difficult language about the God Nicodemus came to him in search of did not run Nicodemus off. Near the end of John we see him again. We don't know what he thinks, but we do know where he is. After the crucifixion, he's come with a hundred pounds of spices to prepare Jesus's body for burial in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb. It's all the evidence we have, but all the evidence we need to believe that Jesus's words with him that night did the work they were intended to do. They kept him near.

Our names for God, our concepts of God, our doctrines of God are not God. They are tools. Tools whose sole purpose is to bring us near to God.

There are days when we probably want to start afresh. Days when we'd rather find new words for God, less problematic words for God, words with less baggage that have done less damage to people over the years. That makes sense. But if we truly want to experience a God who is not of our own making, we probably won't do so if we've made up the terms and the tools that we use in our search.

Kathleen Norris once told of an exchange between an Orthodox theologian and a seminarian at Yale. The theologian had given a talk on the Nicene Creed, and the student asked, "What can one do when one finds it impossible to affirm certain tenets of the Creed?" To which the priest responded, "Well, you just say it. It's not that hard to master. With a little effort, most can learn it by heart." The student thought he'd been misunderstood. So he named a few things in the creed he didn't believe. To which the priest said, "You just say it. Particularly when you have difficulty believing it. Just keep saying it. It will come to you eventually." This only ticked off the earnest seminarian further. "How can I... affirm a creed in which I do not believe?" The old priest shrugged, "It's not your creed. It's our creed..." "Our" being 1700 years of Christian people. "Eventually it may come to you. For some it takes longer than others."

When we baptize little Louise in a few minutes, we'll do so with words that neither you nor I made up or even chose. Words like Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But also grace and evil and trust and Satan and savior and love. And if we use them well with her over the years, she won't carry precisely the same image or description of God in her head as we do. But if we use them well, she will have stayed near. Near to us, we hope. But, more importantly, near to the God who has made her and redeemed her and who loves her in ways we will never be able to fully describe.

Because it would hardly be loving to send her into the world with the burden of finding a savior of her own, would it? Let's commit to using these old creeds and liturgies with all the care and grace and wisdom we can muster. And let's use them for the purpose they were created for: to keep us nearer than we would have been. Nearer to the place where, not a love that we've made up, but the Love that made us might blow into our lives next.