

Sermon for June 16, 2019, Trinity Sunday
St. Andrew Presbyterian Church
Romans 5: 1-5; John 15: 26-27; 16: 13-15
Rev. Rosemary McMahan

Lord Jesus Christ, let your Spirit of Truth speak to us through these words. Amen.

Mysteries and Truth

Today is Trinity Sunday, and today is Father's Day. This past week, as I read our scripture passages for this morning, both of which support the teaching of the three in one God we worship, I thought about the men in my life who have blessed me. Some of them were like the Father, the one in charge. Some were like Jesus Christ, humble and giving. Some were like the Holy Spirit, pushing me forward with encouragement. Some were like all three. All of them were about the importance of relationship.

I found myself both grateful for, and humbled by, the remembrance of so many of these men—most now deceased—who God allowed to cross paths with me and join me for a time on my journey. There is nothing I did to deserve any of these relationships. They came to me, unbidden, as gifts of God always do. This morning, I'd like to share some things about some of those men with you.

First, my own father, Harry W. Rice, born and raised in Mooresville, AL. He invited me into relationship with God on an evening walk when I was about five. My dad loved to take walks after dinner, but my mother was often too busy cleaning up after seven kids to join him, so on this occasion, he asked me. It was a clear starry night in Falls Church, VA, as we crested the small hill on our street and stopped to look at the skies. Dad pointed out the Big and Little Dippers, and I asked the usual childhood questions: *Who made the stars?* To which my dad replied, *God did.* And then I asked, as any intelligent child would, *Who made God?* and that got a bit more complicated for my straight-forward, factual, CPA dad.

As Dad tried to explain how no one made God, how God has always been, along with Jesus and the Holy Spirit, he finally stopped and said, "God is a mystery, something we cannot explain well enough to understand, but we believe anyway. I believe in God even though I can't prove God is real because it makes me a better person who makes the world a better place." And so, I believed, too, because what my father spoke to me in that moment of relationship was truth—his truth—and it pointed me to God.

I was graced by that moment, given a gift I couldn't have earned. When my dad had a stroke at 64 and died two weeks after, while I was expecting his first grandson, it was a mystery. Why? By that time, my parents had one remaining child at home, my youngest sister who was a sophomore in high school. They had planned to travel the globe after

Lee Ann graduated, but that was not how their story ended. I don't know why, after the challenging work of raising seven children, my parents didn't have their own time together. It's a mystery, a larger truth that I won't know the answer for in this life.

My husband's father, Sonny McMahan, became my dad after my own father died. In fact, Sonny was part of my life longer than my dad had been. Sonny had a wry sense of humor. I remember calling Dennis at his home when we were dating, and Sonny answered the phone. I asked, "May I speak with Dennis, please?" to which I heard, "Dennis McMahan?" and I said, "Yes, please." He replied, "You have the wrong number." I was so embarrassed that I said, "Oh, I am so very sorry to bother you," and hung up quickly. A moment later the phone rang and it was Dennis. He was laughing so hard as he asked, "If you had the wrong number, how did my dad know you were asking for Dennis *McMahan*?" Yes, Sonny, you got me on that one.

As many of you know, Sonny was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in his 70's. Sonny had been a successful electrical engineer working for decades on projects at Redstone Arsenal. He was a handyman in all areas, and a faithful and generous servant of God. To watch the decline of this humble, yet capable man, dwindle to complete reliance on others for everything was one of the most difficult things I've ever had to do. I never once heard Sonny complain—not after the diagnosis; not when Peggy had to start feeding him; then bathing him; not when he became bedridden. Never. It remains a mystery to me that a man as good as Sonny had to endure such a long goodbye. Sonny taught me about acceptance, and his truth was his ability to accept without rancor whatever life handed him.

One of my favorite gentlemen from my pastoral experience was Ted Finley. Ted was a large man, about 6'3', a hearty, overall-wearing fellow who worked as a civil servant his entire career, again at the Arsenal, but who came from Paint Rock Valley and lived in rural Madison County. Ted was a longtime elder at Big Cove Presbyterian Church and the agent God used to call me there as a pastor.

Ted was the church member who was always, always, on the front steps of the church, before and after worship. He wanted to say hello to each and every person who walked in the doors, to get the scoop on any new visitors, and to hand his peanut butter log candy to each child that walked in. Ted was a talker. He liked to come up to me right before worship to share some nonsensical story or joke that would throw me just a bit off balance. I'd be shaking my head as he walked away. He also gave me a quarter for every new person who joined the church.

Ted loved garage sales, getting up early every Saturday morning and hitting as many as he could, much to the dismay of his wife who didn't need three waffle irons. One Sunday, he told me, "I met a lady at a garage sale yesterday who just moved into the Cove, and I told her a little bit about our church." I said, "That's great, Ted. Is she going

to visit?” He fidgeted a bit and replied, “Well, she talked so much I never actually invited her. I figured we didn’t need someone that chatty around.” That was Ted.

Ted died of cancer in 2006, four years after I had met him. His passing was a mystery to me about why Big Cove Church had to lose its best evangelist, about why he had to die and miss seeing his two young grandsons, who fished with him, grow up. Ted was my biggest joker and my biggest supporter. His truth was his authenticity. Ted never tried to be anyone other than who God made him to be—a pillar of God’s church and a most hospitable greeter. How did I ever earn a relationship with Ted Finley? Only by grace.

Then there was Washio Ishii. The Rev. Ishii was a former Japanese Buddhist who had wanted to be a kamikaze pilot in WWII because he believed so much in honoring and obeying the Emperor. Instead, he met a Christian girl from Huntsville, Al, who was on a mission trip in Japan, and he converted to Christianity, upon which his father immediately disowned him. Washio and Jean ended up in Louisville, Ky, where Washio completed his Masters of Divinity in the early 1960’s, expecting to be called to a church in Hawaii. Instead, God called him to New Market, Alabama. You can imagine the welcoming reception he received from neighbors.

It was in New Market that Washio, a young preacher, began his two-decade circuit rider ministry, also preaching at Madison Crossroads and Big Cove Church on a rotating basis. The stories from those days are many and varied as Washio faced, and overcame, prejudices of every sort. One of my favorite stories is about when Washio overheard one session member speaking to another about how to get rid of the “wild Jap.” Very concerned, he later found out that was the name of a noxious weed. On another occasion, still learning English, Washio used the “b” word in a sermon when referring to a female dog. He never did that again.

If you want to talk about mysteries, then here is one for you. Washio’s healthy 21 year old son, in training to be an Army Ranger, survived a serious diving accident, only to become a paraplegic. A few years later, due to the stress of caring for Timothy, Washio’s wife, Jean, died of a sudden heart attack. Why? Why would these sorrows happen to such a faithful man? We won’t know in this life. Perhaps the Spirit of Truth to which Jesus refers is something beyond a factual understanding. Perhaps it has something to do with faith.

Washio retired after Jean’s death and left Big Cove for 10 years. He returned after hearing that some strange woman out of nowhere had been called there, and so our relationship began, because, as he admitted to me, he was curious. Washio was a wonderful mentor, a loyal supporter, and a very good friend. He died in 2013 at 82, after a long battle with diabetes. Washio’s truth was loyalty: he demonstrated the same loyalty he once had had for his Emperor with his friends and with his God.

While there are several other men that I wish I had time to mention, I will end with my husband, Dennis, who is alive and well, though perhaps a little grayer after all our years together. Dennis was 19 when he married me, an older woman, who was 20. He has followed me through parenting, through earning two degrees when I was a young mother, through a career as a college English instructor, through a period of writing poetry and novels, banking on that million-dollar best seller, and into a ministry of 17 years. Dennis is a life-long engineer from birth. I am a liberal arts' major. It hasn't always been an easy marriage, but it has been a rich one. Whichever direction I took, Dennis supported me, and in my ministry, he has been my co-pastor in multiple ways and my ever-faithful IT man.

What Dennis has taught me about is grace, that same grace that Paul mentioned, giving gifts I did nothing to deserve, whether time, attention, paychecks, or forgiveness. That's a mystery to me, something that will always go beyond factual understanding. Grace is Dennis' truth, and I am forever grateful for it.

If you haven't noticed, these stories have all been about **relationship**. The theological doctrine of the Holy Trinity--how one God can be composed of three separate beings— isn't something to be logically understood or explained but something to be experienced through relationship. Within one God are three beings who live and serve and create and love in complete harmony and equality with one another. Sometimes we need the Father God, the Creator, the one in control. Sometimes we need our friend and teacher, Jesus. And sometimes we need the wisdom and courage of the Spirit. In an amazing act of graciousness, God provides us spiritually with all that we need. It is all a mystery we cannot explain, but it is a truth we can model.

None of the gifts I received from the men I mentioned would have been possible if they had not included me in relationship. Being in relationships with others, within this building and without, is our calling as Christians; it is how we model our Triune God. It may be a mystery, but isn't it worth practicing and believing because it makes us, and the world, a better place?

Sometime this week, I invite you to reflect on some of the men, or women, who have been grace to you, without whom you would be different. How did they invite you into relationship? What gifts did you receive? Then I invite you to take time to entire into relationship with the Triune God, be it Father, Son, or Holy Spirit, and rest in the knowledge that you are loved now and forever. What will be your response? Who is waiting for the mystery and the gift of being in relationship with you?

In the name of the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.