
Ecstasy Remains

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
The First Sunday after Pentecost: Trinity Sunday – Year B

I have a running debate with my old seminary professor, dead now for almost twenty years. But every time I'm assigned to preach, I consult his book called *Preaching the Lectionary* (Reginald H. Fuller, 1915-2007). Prof. Fuller's book remains a most reliable guide for me as I prepare every sermon. However, there also remain my debates with him on a few matters. And one of those remaining matters arises with today's reading from Romans. At the end of that reading we are told that followers of Jesus will share in his glory "if—in fact, we suffer with him" (Rom. 8:17).

You will probably agree with me that selling people on 'suffering with Christ' is not easily done in our time. Suffer with Christ, the apostle said, "so that we may also be glorified with him." What could possibly persuade people, even in Biblical times, to believe in something called "glory" that would make our 'suffering with Christ' so attractive, so desirable, so compelling? And yet, the evidence of the early church is clear. In those decades and generations, and even centuries now since Pentecost, some kind of glory became so attractive that the Christians preceding us have been willing and even eager 'to suffer with Christ in order to be glorified with him.'

Pondering that unlikely fact leads me right back to my seminary professor, and his comment on that text. He wrote:

[Paul] never denied the ecstatic gifts of the Spirit but always emphasized that the real test of the Spirit was not ecstasy but suffering in the Way of the Cross . . ."

—Reginald H. Fuller, Daniel Westburg, "Reading II: Romans 8:12-17;" Trinity Sunday B, *Preaching the Lectionary*, 3rd ed. (Liturgical Press, 2006), p. 287

Well, there it is: there's the crux of my debate: that claim, "the real test of the Spirit was not ecstasy but suffering in the Way of the Cross." As in so many debates nowadays I want to say—and even to shout: Why is it either/or? Why not *both/and*? Why not say that 'the real test of the Spirit is BOTH ecstasy AND suffering in Way of the Cross?' So on this Trinity Sunday, here's my appeal for an *ecstatic* and Spirit-filled Way of the Cross; both *ecstasy* and *suffering* as we continue to make real the kingdom of God.

I want to make this appeal particularly as an African American follower of Christ. But I'll come back to that in a few minutes. First, I make this appeal as an *elder* follower of Christ. I have lived on this earth for seven decades now—six decades since I made my first profession of faith as a nine year-old boy. But as I'm continuing to live into my Christian commitment I'm becoming aware of the pull away from ecstasy; away from ecstasy and toward some stereotypical attitudes. We might call them the worldly attitudes of an elder. In that connection, listen again to the worldly attitudes of an elder Christian from the 1600s.

Some of us will recall that "Old Nun's Prayer," where she prays that God will deliver her from becoming "a sour old person." The prayer is available on the internet, where it is described as being found in an old English church and attributed to an anonymous nun writing in the 1600s. Today, however, let's hear her text as a communal prayer. Let's hear it as the prayer of a beloved community; as the prayer of a community of persons interceding for one another to be delivered from becoming 'sour old people' and instead being restored to be ecstatic Spirit-filled people. Listen again as we render the "The Old Nun's Prayer" an intercessory prayer; as a prayer not only for the nun herself but also for her sisters; and not only for her sisters inside the nunnery but also for the rest of us outside the nunnery—even for us assembled here today. Here's how that adapted prayer would go. "Lord," she would pray collectively . . .

Lord, you know better than [me and my sisters] know ourselves
that we are growing older and one day will be old . . .

Release us from craving to
straighten out everybody's affairs.
Make us thoughtful but not moody;
helpful but not bossy.

With our vast store of wisdom
it seems a pity not to use it all;
but you know, Lord, that we want a few friends at the end.

Keep [my and my sisters'] minds free from the recital of endless details,
give us wings to get to the point.
Seal our lips on our aches and pains,
they are increasing and love of rehearsing them
is becoming sweeter as the years go by.
We dare even to ask for grace enough
to enjoy the tales of others' pains;
help us to endure them with patience . . .

Teach [me and my sisters] the glorious lesson that occasionally
we may be mistaken.

Keep us reasonably sweet.
we might not want to be saints; some of them are so hard to live with,
and a sour old person is one of the
crowning works of the devil.

[Finally, give me and my sisters] the ability to see good things in unexpected places, and talent in unexpected people,
and give us, O Lord the grace to tell them so. AMEN.

—"Old Nun's Prayer," adapted; anonymous 17th century; found in an English Church;
accessed 5/26/24 at www.thomasmorecenter.org/resources/prayers/old-nuns-prayer/

Well, there you have it! A collective prayer to avoid the pitfalls of becoming 'sour old people' or sour old Christians. But today I want also to render that prayer as a Pentecostal or Trinitarian one: to pray that we may end of our lives as Spirit-filled lives; that we might keep experiencing the bliss that we attribute to the three Persons of the blessed Trinity—each one deferring to the others; each one preferring to glorify the others rather than one's own Self.

That's the hallmark of the blessed Trinity, as you may recall from that classic icon by the Russian iconographer, Andrei Rublev. If I could, I would paint for you his image of three persons in a triangle, with the central figure and the one to its right both inclining their heads to their right; inclining toward that favored figure 'on their right hand.' But then that favored figure to their right also inclines its head toward the other two.



The Trinity by Andrei Rublev (1410-11 or 1425-27)

Accessed 5/26/2024 at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trinity_\(Andrei_Rublev\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trinity_(Andrei_Rublev))

So the circle is complete. It's a completed circuit of beloved community in the Godhead: each sovereign person deferring to and favoring some other person in that sacred space that they occupy together.

Here's how the apostle Paul expressed such love in the opening verses of his letter to the Colossians. "I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake," he wrote.

I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in

Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church (Colossians 1:24).

That's the apostolic idea here: that there are some forms of Christ-like affliction that we can rejoice to take on ourselves, and to suffer for the sake of bringing about God's beloved community.

So here we may also envision the church as a living image of Trinitarian community. It's the vision—and the increasing reality for more than 2,000 years—of each of us practicing a life of interceding on behalf of one another; praying for each other's material needs as well as each other's emotional and spiritual needs.

Now this is where I also want to remind us of our shared heritage here in these United States. It's a legacy from our African American Christian predecessors. Going all the way back to Emancipation after our Civil War (1860-1865), Black church worship began as a kind of ecstatic Christianity. It still continues today to remind us of the early church with its Pentecostal energy. But that ecstatic energy was not displayed only in enthusiastic worship. It was also featured in mutual aid, and in the love of enemies, and even in forgiveness and reconciliation of persecutors.

Now that ecstatic legacy does not belong just to Black religious experience. It belongs to all Christians throughout the millennia. Yes, particularly here in these United States, we continue to have opportunities to experience Spirit-filled ways of being Christ-like; to experience ecstatic ways to create beloved community and build the kingdom of God.

So in the spirit of this Trinity Sunday, find a way to increase joyful belief. If all you can believe-in is a 'moral arc of the universe that is bending toward justice,' then believe-in that. But find a belief that empowers you to suffer obstacles and trials and setbacks and mistakes and apologies and correcting mistakes—yes, all of that, and all of that with the ecstasy that we're not alone in these efforts, but accompanied.

If the only spirit you can believe-in is the spirit of those who went before us with joyful anticipation of a righteous outcome, then hold on to that joy of being accompanied by predecessors alongside your righteous cause; predecessors who suffered setbacks but persisted; who endured hardships but persisted; who made mistakes but corrected them as they persisted.

For, like Jesus himself on that night that Nicodemus came to him asking about his kingdom, we too can say that 'we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; so receive our testimony about earthly things so that you may also be encouraged about heavenly things' (cf. John 3:11-12). In the 19th century we saw the end of slavery in these United States when many despaired that it would never end. In the 20th century we saw the end of segregation in these United States when many despaired that it would never end.

But the heavenly thing about all that we have seen is *both* a Way of the Cross—a practice of suffering love for the sake of beloved community—and also a way of ecstasy: a way of experiencing the ecstatic joys of beloved community. On this Trinity Sunday, know that there is a glory here. And together let us find a way to access it: both ‘the agony and the ecstasy;’ both the way of suffering love, and the glory of the blessed Trinity, as we continue interceding for one another—in one eternal glory.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit:

Our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

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