

Sermon for Trinity Sunday
RCL Lectionary, Year B
Isaiah 6:1-8, Psalm 29, Romans 8:12-17, John 3:1-17

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The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

Of Bishops, Creeds, and Nicodemus
by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

Northern Michigan. The Upper Peninsula. Some of you have heard me talk story about this part of our country before, as it is one of the places that holds happy childhood memories. My Dad and his siblings grew up there, and my grandfather served as a priest in various parts of The Episcopal Diocese of Northern Michigan for many years.

Northern Michigan is marked by a number of features that make it a distinctive diocese of our Church. Far from urbanized, it is decidedly rural, but not in the Kansan wheat-field and empty horizon kind of way. I mean rural in that I remember on my trips up North driving for miles and miles and seeing next to nothing but dense woods on both sides of the road. Winters can be dark, cold, and long. But summers are often cool and lovely. These I most remember from my childhood visits as being marked by fishing, walking in the woods, and sailing on quiet waters of Little Lake, where my grandparents lived in a tiny cottage on the grounds of the diocesan conference center.

The Diocese of Northern Michigan, rural and therefore small as it is in numbers, has also been distinctive in the greater Episcopal Church for many years in its pursuit and development of alternatives to the traditional one priest / one parish model of ministry. Instead, they have led the way in a fuller approach to the ministry of all the baptized: one that builds teams of lay and ordained leadership often trained and raised up locally. These models of ministry are now multiplying across The Episcopal Church and have even influenced mission and planning ministry in recent years here in the Diocese of California.

A few months ago, Northern Michigan elected one of their own priests, Kevin Thew Forrester – a well-read, scholarly, and experienced pastor – to be their new bishop. The election might have gone by with relatively little notice, except for the diocese's approach to discerning Fr. Forrester's candidacy made his the only name in the election. Also somewhat notable was his lay ordination in the Zen Buddhist tradition. Zen meditation forms part of his spiritual discipline. Both unusual

factors garnered attention on the election, and you can imagine, given the contentious temperament of our Church in recent years a number of Episcopal websites and blogs began to buzz. But the sparks really began to fly as bishops and other authorities of the Church started reading and reviewing Kevin Thew Forrester's sermons and published liturgies.

Now most of us Christians, in an everyday sort of way, don't concern ourselves over the doctrine of our leaders, lay or ordained. Most of us rather hold in such times of discernment more practical questions in our hearts: Will he love us? Will she support us when we are hurting? Will he be there with us when we grieve the loss of our loved ones or reach the end of this life ourselves? Will she pray with us, administer the sacraments faithfully with us, and understand our needs and support and nurture our ministries as a faith community? These criteria appear to have been met in Kevin Thew Forrester for the good people of the Diocese of Northern Michigan, Zen practice and unusual canonical procedures notwithstanding. That's what his election means.

But the greater Church must approve elections of bishops by consenting to them – with a majority of diocesan Standing Committees and bishops weighing in following each election. And it became clearer this week that that the election of an Episcopal bishop for Northern Michigan may not garner the necessary consents from the greater church to allow the consecration to go forward – something so unusual that hasn't happened our Church in several decades.

The real and substantive obstacle to consent – the one that leaps across the recent divisions in our Church – appears to be, remarkably, doctrinal. Concerns have been raised that Kevin Thew Forrester's sermons and revised liturgies reflect extensive and unacceptable changes to the primary content of the Christian faith broadly and our particular Episcopal and Anglican traditions.

And these concerns are – I repeat – *doctrinal*. The controversy around the election is over foundational doctrinal matters like atonement, sin, grace, salvation, the content of our Creeds that we recite each Sunday, and therefore the nature and graceful actions of the Trinity. It's the first time in my lifetime I can ever remember a substantive doctrinal dispute rising to this level in The Episcopal Church. I can only speculate as to why this is happening now for the first time in living memory, but I am fairly sure of one thing: the on-the-street notion that we are a non-doctrinal church is suddenly and decisively being put out to pasture. Perhaps that is appropriate for Trinity Sunday!

Now I could spend pages and pages and hours talking to you about what precise changes Kevin Thew Forrester made to the creeds and the liturgies in his parish and what pastoral and theological concerns and perspectives drove him to make such changes. We could debate whether or not they substantively alter doctrine

and violate the disciplines of our tradition in ways that merit his not being consecrated a bishop. I have learned and respected friends and colleagues who fall decisively on both side of that question. And I must confess to being somewhat grateful – opinionated as you know I can be – that I am not asked to help make any kind of official decision on this matter. For indeed the effects of either his being consecrated or not will be far-reaching for people living and following Christ in country that remains in my blood. And I feel that deeply. . . for them, and for him.

But I will say this: There is profound spiritual danger in asserting the rectitude of either outcome with certainty. Whether the consents are given are not, whether the diocese welcomes Kevin Thew Forrester as their next bishop or not . . .If truth be told, we can never know for certain whether The Episcopal Church is doing right or wrong by the Diocese of Northern Michigan and their bishop-elect. That determination is and will remain in God’s gracious hands.

For this is not ultimately about Kevin Thew Forrester. Nor is this ultimately about the Diocese of Northern Michigan. This story is ultimately is about us, as a Church, sitting before Christ along with Kevin Thew Forrester and every other Christian who has ever lived and wrestled with the language of grace just as Nicodemus does in today’s Gospel. Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedrin, the highest court of ancient Israel, comes to Jesus under cover of darkness and seeks explanation for the signs Jesus is performing. Jesus responds by inviting Nicodemus to look beyond the signs and into deeper and abundant life in God’s Spirit – the life that comes from above. Nicodemus’ initial reaction, it seems, is one of puzzlement. Like Nicodemus, we can get caught up in expecting simple answers to life's profound questions around sin, hope, love, and salvation. We too often seek “packagable” earth-bound doctrines explanations to reign in the wayward children with measurable discipline; we vainly want simple clarity for our muddled, blinkered view of reality. But Christ tells Nicodemus and us as well that this will simply not do.

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We are Christians in the Episcopal tradition in a period in our common life where we wrestle – though often quietly and even silently – with doctrine of all kinds, including the doctrine of the Trinity embodied in the Creeds. Doctrine has been badly abused in recent years to attack us for ushering in long-delayed justice for some of our marginalized sisters and brothers. But the doctrines of our faith have also been badly skewed by our scientific, computerized age – an age of precise language, bits and bytes, on and off, right or wrong; an age that has gutted metaphor, mocked nuanced prose, and sidelined poetry. Compounding this is the tendency in our greater Christian culture born of revivals and fundamentalisms to turn the rich meanings of Creeds and even large swaths of Scripture into mere

litmus paper that registers the color of salvation if we “believe” it, or the color of damnation if we don’t.

You see, instead of offering Nicodemus a piece of theological litmus paper, Jesus talks of rebirth - a complete giving over of our lives to the unpredictable Spirit for renewal. Christ challenges Nicodemus and us to let go of the narrow traps of literalistic faith caught up in words and other earthly measures and risk being born again by engaging the meaning behind the words and signs. Put another way, Christ offers Nicodemus and all of us the relationship of grace that will relieve us from the heavy but garden-variety sin of *needing to know with certainty*.

As has often been said, the opposite of faith is not doubt, but *certainty*. That certainty puts our God in a measurable box and robs us blind of the profound experiences of God like the one we hear in Isaiah today.

We are about to recite the Creed again, that ancient creed hammered out by bishops over several decades over 1500 years ago. The Creed that tries to articulate in words the substance and actions of the Trinity we celebrate this day. We are not saved by a call for narrow intellectual assent or claiming certainty over the literal truth of the Creed’s imperfect language. We are called instead by Christ to a salvation beyond the text – one that the text can only point us toward. It is the story of the Creed that touches us. It is the faith that is behind the Creed that saves us. It is a faith that was held by its authors and woven into its words, a faith held by every Christian who has recited and wrestled with this statement of doctrine since that time. A faith that is made by our joining the dance of the Trinity, the three persons of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, into whose life and salvation we were baptized. A relationship with this Triune God that frees us from sin, nourishes us in Word and Sacrament, and by whose abundant grace and holy self-offering we are led into eternal life. *Amen.*