

Trinity Sunday, May 27, 2018 St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland WA
Nigel Taber-Hamilton Isaiah 6:1-8, Romans 8:12-17, John 3:1-17

My wife Rachel told me a story many years ago about a time when she, as a graduate assistant, was marking student papers. One paper stood out – the student wrote eloquently about the invisible in our society: about who they were, and why they were invisible. It was, she said, a truly impressive, quite remarkable paper. She gave it an 'F'! She had no choice; the student had failed to follow the most fundamental rule of paper-writing: make sure you actually write it about the subject that's been assigned! That subject? Roughly, it was this: "Reflect on a part of the Pledge of Allegiance". The student didn't know her pledge – she thought it was "for the invisible," not "indivisible"!

That's an interesting word: "indivisible;" it means "incapable of being divided," "inseparable." How do you apply it to the United States of America when so many of us recognize the existence of internal divisions that one writer has described as the eleven distinct "nations" in North America? We're divided in so many ways. So the Pledge must be making a distinct, non-literal claim; a claim based on a mutually agreed vision, if not a provable reality: that despite our differences – of region and religion, of gender and ethnic roots, of national origin and political perspective – despite all those things, we are one.

We are one because we choose to see ourselves as one; we are one because of our common commitment to a shared idea outlined in our national sacred texts, especially the Constitution and Bill of Rights. We are one.

And even there – the Constitution and Bill of Rights – we don't all agree; yet – as I said in my weekly reflection – we willingly submit to the compact that the idea enshrined in those documents reflects.

On this Memorial Day weekend we remember those who have died to protect this mutually endorsed compact. They died for the Constitution and the Bill of Rights; they died for the Republic it created; they died for us.

We say the Pledge not because each of us agrees with everything that the United States of America is, or everything that the United States of America does. In the end, we say it as an act of loyalty to the idea of the United States of America. In the end we say it because we are willing to invest some significant part of our own personal hope, our trust and our actions in the vision – *"one nation, under God, with liberty and justice for all."*

Does the Pledge of Allegiance say all that there is to say about the United States of America? No, it doesn't. Rather, it points us in a direction; it acts as a sign-post toward a place, or a moment, or an encounter where we might garner a deeper understanding of the nature of the bonds of affection that hold us together, that tie us into the mystic chords of memory going back to the moments and events when there emerged on this continent a particular, shared idea of oneness.

I think it is serendipitous that Memorial Day weekend falls on the Sunday when we celebrate the

Trinity! I say that because trying to get a handle on what this religious day is about is greatly helped by what I've just said, especially if you think of the Nicene Creed in the same terms as the Pledge of Allegiance.

The Creed makes a distinct claim based on a mutually agreed vision (in 325 A.D. at Nicea and 381 A. D. In Constantinople) that the God of scripture can be described in three main ways. Even then, the language about those three ways wasn't in any way final; yet something had to be said.

The Creed's authors knew that their summary and the claims it made weren't then – and aren't now – reflective of a provable reality. They knew, quite simply, that it was the best they could do, the best way (or as one contemporary theologian has said, the “least worst way”) of talking about God. And so, despite the disagreements about God's nature and identity, despite the different ways that human beings have encountered God and then tried to describe those encounters in a systematic way, despite all of the challenges facing a relatively small group of 4th Century Christians, they said something.

I believe I'm safe in saying that those “framers” knew that their work merely scratched the surface; they knew that the Trinitarian Creed doesn't say all there is to say about God! Not even a minuscule part! Their Creed points hesitantly toward the dawn and the rising sun and invites each of us and all of us to join together in a shared journey into the dazzling light of God's identity. That light is so intense!

Have you noticed that in very bright sunlight some of the details of what's around you shimmer? Lose focus? Even disappear? Or that they look different to you than to someone else? That's the best metaphor I have for saying that, in the end, all language is conditional; that it will always fail in the impossible task of conveying the eternal, unfettered truth of God.

The sooner we accept the limits of our ability to describe that which is so much bigger than words can encompass, and fall back into a reflective silence the better – the more likely we are, ironically, to encounter the One about whom our words have failed us.

In speaking – or singing – the Creed each week we're not saying “I/we accept that this is the definitive way God is – the only way to understand God.” Rather, what we're doing is saying that we're willing to enter into a compact with each other about God, to say that there is a God; that our ancestors have encountered this God in several very important ways; and this God cares for us and wants to be in relationship with us – to partner with us – for the health and well-being of all creation, including ourselves.

In the end, the Creed, with its theology of Trinity, serves much the same purpose as the Pledge of Allegiance. It provides us with a way to say “I am willing to give my heart to this; I am willing to embrace the shared vision that lies behind these words, because what lies behind them – and beyond them – is something of great beauty, and eternal value and the Ultimate Cause of great joy.” Or, rather, not “what” but “who!” “The One who Lies Behind and Beyond These Words,” who for want of a better theological shorthand we call the Trinitarian God. To that God be the glory, now and always. Amen.