

Trinity Sunday, May 31, 2015. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland WA  
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There's a familiar saying (called a koan) in Buddhism that comes from the founder of the Rinzai sect, Zen Master Linji –“If you meet the Buddha [on the road], kill him.” Linji is offering us Christians something that, on this day – Trinity Sunday – is of great value.

“The road” in that koan is generally taken to mean *the path to Enlightenment*. That path for Christians and Buddhists isn't that different: instead of *the path* we might talk of the *pilgrimage*, instead of *enlightenment* we might say *Kingdom of God*. We journey that road through meditation, study, prayer, and the way we choose to live our lives as people of faith.

But about killing the Buddha? That's pretty violent for a peaceful faith like Buddhism! Well, much like Christianity, Buddhism deals in metaphor as a vehicle for understanding. It is on the metaphorical “road” that is the context for this saying about meeting the Buddha. Imagine meeting some symbolic Buddha. Human beings have a wonderful, challenging ability to imagine! We're really good at re-creating the world in our image – consciously or unconsciously – to suit ourselves. The danger for a Buddhist practitioner is exactly that – to re-create the Buddha in her or his own image: would that figure you meet be a great teacher that you might actually meet and follow in the real world? Could that Buddha be you yourself, having reached Enlightenment? Or maybe you have some idealized image of perfection that equates to your concept of the Buddha or Enlightenment. In Judeo-Christian language that is to create God in our own image – to commit idolatry. !

For Buddhists, the act of self-will that creates a conception of the Buddha will always be flawed. That image must be let go, along with the need for it, because it's an act of selfishness and self-will. It is never the Buddha we meet on the road but the product of but human arrogance and willfulness and it gets in the way of real faith. Thus, since you could never “meet the Buddha on the road,” what you are meeting is not the Buddha.

At the heart of our Christian faith there's something very similar. What this day – Trinity Sunday – proclaims more than anything is that at the heart of our faith there's mystery, a dense opaqueness that hides yet invites. For me there's a solidness and a reassurance in the fact that I cannot fully understand what that word – God – actually means; that it's beyond my grasp, and beyond the grasp of every human being to quantify and define and explain....not, of course, that this truth has every stopped humanity from trying! Witness all the fuss and bother around the history of this day!

If we thought we had done so – if the reality of God were fully explainable, then God would not be God – we wouldn't be talking about God but something else, something “not-quite-God.”

To borrow from Buddhism, if we ever think we have managed to define God, we are, by definition, wrong! God is too rich and too beyond any one set of categories to be captured in any human conception.

That helps explain why the ancients were polytheistic – that they believed in many gods and goddesses. They experienced divine energy and the need to celebrate divine energy in many different areas of their lives and had gods and goddesses to accommodate that: for every longing and every circumstance, from war, through growing crops, through sex, through understanding why your father wouldn't bless you – there was a god or goddess to whom you could turn.

Sometimes they believed in one supreme god who ultimately ruled over lesser gods and goddesses – you can certainly find that in the Old Testament. It's clear they did this because they sensed that divine energy was too rich a reality to be contained in only one way of understanding, that their encounters with the Divine needed – demanded – to be expressed in as rich a way as possible.

Today, for most of humanity (as we have – in some ways! – grown in wisdom) we have come to see God as a unity.

For Jews, Christians, and Muslims, God is one.

But it's also true that for Jews, Christians, and Muslims, there are many metaphors for God, and not a few of them – though certainly not all of them – are shared metaphors: Rock, Bird, Bread, Hope, Cornerstone, Fountain, Gate, Shepherd, King, Lamb, Lion, Physician, Mediator, Vine, Light, Way, Truth, Breath, Wind, Water, Life, Fire, Wisdom, Mother.....not to mention Father, Son, Spirit.

We use metaphors because literal language about God is simply beyond us, with the exception of the concrete descriptions about Jesus that come from the New Testament.

We use metaphors because they convey to us Ultimate Truth beyond provisional truths, Ultimate Reality beyond transitional realities, the infinite beyond the ephemeral, the Permanent beyond the conditional.

For us as Christians, the defining metaphors for God are personal and experiential, not indifferent and disconnected. One of the great challenges for us is that in the first four Centuries of Christian existence the personal and experiential identity we inherited from our Jewish and New Testament ancestors was overwhelmed by the disconnected intellectualism of Greek thought. In the bulletin on page 16 – in its original Greek – is the result.

The Creed is central to our Christian faith – it's pretty much the only statement that unites the vast majority of Christians. And it is a valuable attempt to offer a thought-out theology of God. It is also the provisional, interim, ephemeral, conditional attempting to define the Ultimate, Infinite Reality that – for want of a better word – we name “God.”

The same goes for the Trinity, which the Creed seeks to define – for us as Christians, it is the central intellectual definition of God, a handy and substantial peg on which to hang all of our theological hats. It is who we are and how we have come to understand the Unity that is God.

It is not the final word – that belongs to God. It is the mystery of mysteries, beckoning us to go deeper, to continue the journey, to be open to the possibilities, and to remain rooted in the personal and experiential.

So hold on to this, with the Buddhists, that if we meet the Trinity on the road....well, you know what to do! Instead, embrace the mystery and continue the journey!