

“Words Alone”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
John 3:1-17
June 16, 2019 - Trinity Sunday / Hymn Sing

I have a pastor colleague named David who likes to share these wonderful stories about his daughter, Millie. When she was nearly three, David took Millie with him to go vote. He pointed to the ballot to show her that a girl could grow up to run for president and said, “You can be anything you want to be, sweetheart.” Millie replied, “Can I be a pumpkin?”

A few months ago David reported that Millie, now five, arrived at the breakfast table in a top that clashed wildly with her skirt, and the tights underneath the skirt made the outfit nearly headache-inducing. “Millie, that doesn’t match.” Her question in response made David rethink his whole day: “Daddy, what is ‘match?’”

It was one of those questions that leaves you wondering about your priorities and society’s insistence on conformity. And it left David completely at a loss for how to explain *matching* to Millie. He couldn’t describe it. He had to show it to her in color and through experience.

“Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can these things be?’”

*Come, O Spirit, dwell among us;
give us words of fire and flame.
Help our feeble lips to praise you,
glorify your holy name.*

Words alone struggle to capture the immensity of what we seek in prayer, what we find in the Gospel, and what we experience in community. That’s why preachers keep preaching — because none of us have been able to fully explain God. That’s why poets keep writing — because beauty and heartache and melancholy demand further description.

And I think that’s why we sing in worship — because we are able to come closer to the ineffable glory of God when we take two-dimensional words on a page and add the third dimension of poetry and the fourth dimension of melody and the fifth dimension of harmony and the sixth dimension of timbre and the seventh dimension of acoustics and dimensions that only our amazing musicians know about. In our music, we hear what we cannot see or comprehend or describe. God’s grace vibrates in our bones and our vocal cords and God’s breathy Spirit moves through us. We call out in longing:

*Here bestow on all your servants
what they seek from you to gain;
what they gain from you, forever
with the blessed to retain;
and hereafter in your glory
evermore with you to reign.*

When it is time to celebrate the Lord's Supper, we'll sing our Great Prayer of Thanksgiving using an Advent hymn. It would take me twice as long and not be half as beautiful to tell the Christmas story than verse two of our hymn does:

*When this old world drew on toward night,
you came; but not in splendor bright,
not as a monarch, but the child
of Mary, blameless mother mild.*

And so I find it liturgically appropriate that instead of me dancing around heresies to try to explain the unexplainable doctrine of the Trinity, that we use God's gift of music instead to experience it:

*Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!
Early in the morning our song shall rise to thee.
Holy, holy, holy! merciful and mighty!
God in three persons, blessed Trinity!*

For the Prayers of the People, we'll declare:

*Triune God, mysterious being,
undivided and diverse,
deeper than our minds can fathom,
greater than our creeds rehearse:*

Just as the songs that get played on the radio tell the story of our culture, the hymns we sing are theological confessions. We sing what we believe. I'm a big fan of words. Without words and wordplay and nifty turns of phrases, I'd have to find a new line of work. But in our moments of deepest joy and profound fear and spiraling sorrow, I do believe it's the music that keeps us glued together and helps us come unglued when we need to express truly soul-bursting emotions.

In community, we know that if our voice falters, the ones to our left and our right, before us and behind us will raise their voices enough to maintain the song. The music connects us to tradition and to progress and to something beyond our grasp. Thanks be to God, when nothing in the world can possibly meet our sense of rebirth, or grief, or yearning for belonging, there are sacred notes that will fit. There are verses that will...match what our hearts need to shout.

We are a people striving after God, Christ, and Spirit — striving, but already found. Yearning, but claimed. Beloved, and yet uncertain. We rejoice, and we remain curious, wondering how to wrap our heads around this Triune God who has wrapped holy arms around us.

*The name of God is wild and free,
awhirl in holy mystery.
Alleluia, alleluia!
A secret wrapped in smoke and fire,
still chanted by the temple choir:
Alleluia, alleluia!
Amen.*