

Christmas 2A  
John 1:1-14

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I spent most of Tuesday morning putting the *Crosswinds* newsletter together, an effort that I hope will be rewarded by two things – first that the postal service will get it to you in a timely fashion (which hasn't happened so far), and second that when it does arrive you will read it. I know that many of you thoroughly read *Crosswinds* and the weekly e-newsletter edition because of the emails I receive pointing out my typos. But if you are more likely to toss *Crosswinds* in the pile of junk mail and delete the e-newsletter without reading it or block it so it doesn't clutter your Inbox, I urge you to make a New Year's resolution to read them and to start thinking of St. Barnabas as "we" rather than "they." Read the newsletter to find out what "we" are doing in ministry, not what "they" are doing in ministry. Feel a sense of ownership and belonging about this place, for that is what it means to be church, to be part of a Christian community.

Enough of the commercial. What I wanted to say about the newsletter is simply to observe the great variety of activities that take place at St. Barnabas. There are all the things in *Crosswinds* that one would expect to find in a church newsletter: Bible study opportunities, confirmation events, worship services, prayers for healing, and annual meetings. What good Christian people we are! But there are also many things in the St. Barnabas newsletter this month that might surprise some people, maybe even raise a few eyebrows about the propriety of such events in a Christian church. There are articles about jazz concerts, wine tasting, French cooking, mosquito nets, Italian Renaissance artwork, music lessons, and writing wills. What is this? Have we lost our bearings about what a church is to be? Some might remark that our newsletter seems to have a lot in common with the City of Plymouth Community Education catalog. All we're missing is exercise classes, martial arts, and language classes. Oh, that's right! We've had those here before, too, and probably will again.

Is St. Barnabas losing its way, getting the gospel mixed up with all kinds of secular activities? Are we forgetting the wise advice that it is necessary to "keep the main thing the main thing"? I'm glad you asked that question, because I think our gospel reading from John has something to add to that conversation.

I think we would all agree that the New Testament and the creed affirm that there is one church. The creed uses the terms "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic" to describe this church. There is of course a great deal of variety within this one church. We sometimes get a little sloppy with our terminology and speak of denominations (Lutherans, Methodists, Covenant, Baptists, Catholics) as if they were separate churches, and while there is a minority who fashion themselves as being the only true church while other denominations are not truly Christian, they are a minority. Most agree with the Apostle Paul that there is "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all."

I think we would also all agree that within this oneness there is quite a bit of diversity – diversity in worship styles, diversity in theologies, diversity in interpretation of scripture. If you were to picture the church as a river, you might say that the river is made up of several independent currents, sometimes bumping up against each other, but all flowing in the same direction toward the same goal. Some might use the terms liberal, conservative, orthodox, mystical, legalistic, pietistic, or charismatic for these different currents. Another way to describe the various currents is to refer to them with the terms First Article, Second Article, and Third Article. These terms refer to the creed – the First Article is about God the Father, creator; the Second Article is about Jesus, God the Son, redeemer; the Third Article is about God the Holy Spirit, the sanctifier who makes us holy.

When I was in seminary, one of my professors observed that most Christians profess to be trinitarian, but are in reality functional unitarians. What he meant by that is that there is a tendency to emphasize God's work in one article of the creed and de-emphasize the other two articles. When that happens, the good news of the Christian faith gets badly distorted.

The most common form of functional unitarians are those who emphasize the Second Article about God the Son. That isn't too surprising. After all, we are known as "Christ-ians", followers of Jesus, so it is to be expected that Christians give the Second Article a lot of emphasis. I know this group of Second Article folks well because these are my people. My family roots are in what is often called Scandinavian pietism. Pietists emphasize having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. It's true that Jesus died for the sins of all, but for pietists it is most important to recognize that Jesus died for my sins. I therefore accept Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior. Since I share these pietistic roots, I happen to agree that "this is most certainly true." However, I have come to realize that it is easy and perhaps even common for pietists to act as if the First Article and Third Article don't exist.

When we ignore the Third Article's emphasis that God the Holy Spirit calls and gathers us into the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, pietists easily fall prey to the temptation of understanding the Christian faith to be only about "me and Jesus." I have accepted Jesus into my heart and that's all that matters. I don't have to be bothered with being part of a larger church and the messiness that involves because it demands working together with other Christians, who, though they also recognize Jesus as their Lord and Savior, continue to be sinners and therefore are difficult to work with and it is just much easier to be a Christian by myself, thank you very much. Being a functional unitarian of the Second Article lures us into thinking that we can be independent of other Christians and pick and choose which other Christians we wish to associate with.

Similarly, when we ignore the First Article's emphasis that God the Father Almighty is the creator of heaven and earth, pietists easily fall prey to the thinking that the world can be divided into two compartments, the spiritual and the secular, and that the spiritual compartment is superior to the secular compartment.

Here's where John's gospel has something important to add to our discussion. The gospel begins, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being."

Of all the gospels, John most clearly affirms that we should not think of our lives in terms of spiritual and secular. I think that “spiritual” and “secular” are human categories that are not part of God’s vocabulary. Creation is a unity, and all of creation is God’s good creation. We call Christmas the Festival of the Incarnation. The “carn” part of incarnation comes from the Latin word for flesh or meat. When John says, “The Word became flesh”, he indicates that God has fully entered and embraced the human experience. All of creation is God’s good creation. All of creation is the object of God’s love and concern. The incarnation is God’s statement that God is not interested in just part of our lives, but in the totality of our lives – our bodies, our work, our culture, our food, our environment, our social policies, our music, our art. All is part of God’s good creation.

I’ve only had time to show how we distort the Christian faith if we emphasize the Second Article to the detriment of the First and Third. It is just as easy to distort the Christian faith by overly emphasizing the First Article or the Third Article, and it would be worth taking the time some day to explore those distortions as well. My point is to remind us that God calls us to be fully Trinitarian Christians, giving proper emphasis to all three articles, all three of God’s ways of working with us – creating, redeeming, and sanctifying.

And so at St. Barnabas we do focus on inviting people into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ (Second Article) AND we encourage one another to live godly lives as part of the one church (Third Article) AND we celebrate the good gifts of God’s creation – excellent music, good food, and beautiful art (First Article). All of this is wrapped up in the Festival of the Incarnation, the Word made flesh. Merry Christmas!