
May the Three Be With You

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
Trinity Sunday – Year B

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord my strength and our redeemer. Amen. (Paraphrase, Psalm 19:14)

Well here I am again! I'm a college professor at the beginning of summer. Yes-sir-ee—we're on the other side of Memorial Day—on the sunny side of the year; and summer vacations are beginning all across the land. Yes, and many of us have that 1970s song turning-on in our heads, "School's Out for Summer," with the refrain, "school's out forever!" and with the childhood rhyme: "No more pencils, no more books, no more teachers' dirty looks" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/School%27s_Out_%28song%29).

Nevertheless!—nevertheless I observe—the week after this we begin our Vacation Bible School. It's as if we can't get enough of school so we church folk even begin our vacations with Bible School! Still there is that letter, 'V', in that three letter acronym, V-B-S—Vacation Bible School.

And that reminds me of that same old joke I tell at this time every year:

What are the three best things about teaching?

You know the answer—June, July, and August!

But on this particular Sabbath we're also observing another set of three best things: the three best things about God; that God is God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Moreover, today we're celebrating that they are One: One God in three persons. Yes, it's also Trinity Sunday again at the start of summer. And now we get the opportunity to renew our faith and understanding about what it means for us Christians to be a Trinitarian people.

For the preceding fifty days up to Pentecost we focused on Jesus' resurrection and what it means for us to be an Easter people. But now with the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost—which we also observe as the birthday of the Church—now we have all three persons of the blessed Trinity onboard our 'ship of faith,' so to speak. So let's see what that can mean for us here today, in this year of our Lord 2015, for us also to be a Trinitarian people.

And right here I need to beg your indulgence because I'm about to do my college-professor-thing. While under the necessity to be intellectual about the blessed Trinity I also aspire to be creative and somewhat lighthearted as appropriate for inaugurating this season of summer vacations. And I can think of no better way to do that than to imagine with you a vacation Bible course I would love to teach—as if I haven't had enough of school already! Again, the topic would be a little bit lighthearted, and so appropriate for summertime. But it would also allow for some intellectual reflections appropriate to the subject of the Trinity. So here goes.

My proposed vacation Bible course would be about religion and science fiction. That's right: religion and science fiction literature and film; one of my favorite interdisciplinary subjects as a college professor. And I would begin with a classic sci-fi story that most of us know about: the film *Star Wars*. But to try to capture my students' attention I would start right away with a series of *Star Wars* jokes; jokes like:

What do you call a fight between two solar systems?

The answer: star wars.

And the next joke:

On May the 4th how do you greet someone?

The answer: 'May the 4th be with you.'

Of course, to appreciate that joke you would need to know that 'the 4th' is a pun for 'the Force,' and that a key line in the Star Wars film story is, "May the Force be with you!" Now in the Star Wars universe "The Force" is described in a New Age way as an "energy field"—

"... an energy field created by all living things [that] surrounds us, penetrates us, and binds the galaxy together."
(http://scifi.about.com/od/starwarsglossaryandfaq/a/SWAR_glossary_the-force.htm).

That's the description of the Force that is stated by the grand wizard in Star Wars, [Obi-Wan Kenobi](#), as he is instructing his young Jedi warrior and apprentice, [Luke Skywalker](#). But before getting further into the metaphysics or cosmic theories about the Force I would conclude my summer course introduction with this cute little rhyme:

Roses are red, violets are blue, if you love Star Wars, may the force be with you (source:
<http://www.jokes4us.com/celebrityjokes/starwarsjokes.html>).

And right here, Church friends, right here is the link to our sermon theme for today: If you love Jesus Christ, 'May the Three be with you!' I repeat: 'May the Three be with you!' And here's the connection to our scripture readings appointed for today.

In one of the most climactic scenes in the Star Wars films, the Jedi master [Obi-Wan Kenobi](#) dies in a duel with his evil nemesis, the dreaded [Darth Vader](#). However just before he dies Obi-Wan prophesies to Vader with the following declaration. Note that it is a declaration that recapitulates our Church themes of Easter, Pentecost, and Trinity. "You can't win, Vader," he declares:

You can't win, Vader. If you strike me down, I shall become more powerful than you can possibly imagine
(http://scifi.about.com/od/starwarsglossaryandfaq/a/SWAR_glossary_the-force.htm).

Now in the realm of science fiction and religious philosophy this declaration has been explained by one commentator in the following way. This commentator was tasked with answering, "Why does Obi-Wan say that he will become more powerful if Vader kills him?" And here is his answer:

"It's a reference to the power of selfless action for the greater good. Martin Luther King and Gandhi both acted in similar fashion. Their deaths were a catalyst of greater social change. [And here our commentator proceeds to interpret Obi-Wan's prophesy by analogy to the death of Christ.]

"The original act of selflessness for the salvation of humanity was that of Jesus Christ. Obiwan's death (Oh be One is a play on words referencing the union of Christ the Son and God the Father) is an homage to Christ's death and resurrection. Jesus appeared multiple times to his disciples after having risen much like Obiwan appears . . . as a spirit several times throughout the trilogy." (Entry no. 2 at: <http://movies.stackexchange.com/questions/2064/why-does-obi-wan-say-that-hell-become-more-powerful-if-vader-kills-him>)

And so this writer recognizes and invokes the classical theology of dying in order to be reborn into a spiritual existence beyond space and time. And that answer is similar to the scriptures of our gospel appointed for today where Nicodemus asks how one can be born again as spirit without entering a second time into a mother's womb. Now I would be pleased to hear what you think of our Star Wars commentator's connection between religion and science fiction—between Obi-Wan's spirit appearances after death in the Star Wars sequels and the resurrection appearances of our Lord Jesus Christ. In any case I invite you to think with me about today's Trinitarian connection between self-giving love and our own spiritual existence both in this life and in the world to come. Here is our Trinitarian faith as declared in our reading from Romans 8

appointed for this day in the year 2015.

So then, brothers and sisters . . .

if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.

For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!"

it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and joint heirs with Christ--if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him (Romans 8:12-17).

Now this is what it means to 'suffer with Christ so that we may also be glorified with him.' It means to put to death our old life of living for ourselves alone in order to love others in the power of the Spirit. That is otherwise called dying to self and to the world in order to be fully alive beyond ourselves and for others. And that kind of suffering and death has been as powerful in the lives of others as that declaration by Obi Wan Kenobi in Star Wars:

"If you strike me down, I shall become more powerful than you can possibly imagine."

Yes, the testimony of the ages is that dying to self in order to inherit eternal life generates in us a spiritual life 'more powerful than our nemeses can possibly imagine.' And our principal nemesis is this regard in death. Now it's true that St. Francis in one of his esteemed hymns describes death as "our sister . . . from whom no one alive can flee" and in the hymn, "All creatures of our God and King" celebrates

even you, most gentle death, waiting to hush our final breath . . .

You lead back home the child of God, for Christ our Lord that way has trod . . .

(Respectively: "Most high, omnipotent, good Lord," *The Hymnal* no. 406, 407, stanza 7; and "All creatures of our God and King, *The Hymnal* no. 400, stanza 6.)

Nonetheless death also has its 'spiritual counterfeit,' in the guise of an evil archangel or what the New Testament calls "cosmic powers" or "principalities . . . [and] powers" (Ephesians 6:12; RSV and KJV respectively). In that more common representation death functions as our key source of destruction and decay, corruption and violation, or as the most invasive assault on our lives and loves. Indeed we have the opportunity to observe another possible pun with the Star Wars character of evil incarnate, Darth Vader—a name which lends itself to be analogized here as 'death the invader.' In any case we Christians as Easter people are heralds of our Lord's conquest of death and dying, and thus we proclaim with St. Paul in that scripture boast: "Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:54-55). The Stars Wars equivalent of that spiritual conquest, to reiterate, is Obi Wan Kenobi's Jedi boast: "You can't win, Vader. If you strike me down, I shall become more powerful than you can possibly imagine. [\[1\]](#)"

Now in our identity as "children of God," according to our Romans reading, we have the similar possibility of outwitting death as an invasive and counterfeit spirituality. We too can put death on notice and declaring. "You can't win . . . If you strike me down, I shall become more powerful than you can possibly imagine." Unlike the science fiction universe of Star Wars and the Force, however, we have this capacity through the power of the Spirit—the power of self-giving love. Through the daily dying to self that we exercise and practice until becoming adepts, we become one with the Godhead in which self-giving love is the binding force that also unites the three persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Indeed, it is by and through their love for one another that the worlds were created, we claim by faith. In our Christian cosmology we envision a universe that is not simply defined by the physics of outer space—the astrophysics of a vast expanse of dark energy and dark matter punctuated by stars and galaxies and black holes generated by the Big Bang. Rather our cosmology is a theological one in which the three blessed persons of the Holy Trinity created the worlds out of their generous will to bestow existence on creatures within finite forms of space and time, matter and substance. It is that generosity, otherwise described as love, that the medieval poet Dante also celebrated in the final verse of his epic trilogy, *The Divine Comedy*—centuries before the Star Wars epic saga:

"Already my desire and my will were being turned like a wheel . . . by the Love which moves the sun and the other stars."^[51] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paradiso_%28Dante%29

Church friends, that is also what today's observance of the blessed Trinity can mean to us in this year of 2015, that our 'desires and wills are also being turned like a wheel . . . by the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.' Just as in the Star Wars universe there is a Force that "surrounds us, penetrates us, and binds the galaxy together," so in our Trinitarian universe there is the love that binds in unity the three persons of the Godhead and that likewise permeates all creation and ourselves as well.

And now may we, who have covenanted together to be the body of Christ alive in the world today, may we also be adepts and avatars of that love—the love that our gospel celebrates in that familiar verse from John 3:16:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him . . . may have eternal life..."

And here let me paraphrase—

'For God the three-persons as Creator so loved the world'

'that God the three-persons as Redeemer gave Godself'

'so that everyone who likewise desires and wills may have God the eternal Spirit as their source of infinite life as well.'

And so Church family let us love one another with a Trinitarian love, and our neighbors and strangers and even our enemies—as our Lord enjoined us; so that the entire universe will become permeated by this declaration of faith: May the Three be with you!

In the name of God: "*Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend,*" Amen!

(Source: "O Worship the King," *The Hymnal* no. 388, stanza 5)

[1] Source: http://scifi.about.com/od/starwarsglossaryandfaq/a/SWAR_glossary_the-force.htm. N.B. There is a debate among Sci-Fi commentaries on Star Wars regarding the mortality vs. immortality of adepts or avatars of the Force in the Star Wars universe. Compare the following two contrasting sources.

Only a Jedi who adheres to the 'good' side becomes part of The Force in the event of his death.

A Jedi adherent of the dark side who perishes is truly dead; he cannot survive as a part of The Force. Hence Vader, having adopted the dark side, had no knowledge that a Jedi was capable of surviving beyond death. This is why Kenobi warns him that he has a surprise coming if he strikes Kenobi down.

We learn later, in 'Revenge of the Jedi', that the Emperor has imbued Vader with awesome powers, by courtesy of the Dark Side. It gives tremendous power in life, but there is no existence after death. Vader has learned about the Dark Side from the Emperor, so they are both ignorant of the truth about The Force. Ultimately, Vader saves Luke from the Emperor, turning against the Dark Side, thereby redeeming himself; hence Anakin is accepted into The Force, and Luke can see him - or his 'ghost' or spirit - become a part of it.

It is interesting to note, from Leia's reactions in that final scene, that only Luke can see Kenobi, Yoda and Anakin. Only another Jedi has the power to communicate with one who has passed into The Force. Others, such as Leia, cannot see or communicate with them. [Source: Movies and TV Stack Exchange; Entry no. 3 at <http://movies.stackexchange.com/questions/2064/why-does-obi-wan-say-that-hell-become-more-powerful-if-vader-kills-him>]

On the other hand—

Star Wars Glossary: Force Ghost

Definition: A Force ghost is the spirit of a dead Force user who is able to communicate with the living. The concept first

appears in [The Empire Strikes Back](#), when [Obi-Wan Kenobi's](#) spirit communicates with Luke and Yoda. While the Original Trilogy suggested that all Jedi become Force ghosts, later material established that becoming a Force ghost is a special, learned ability -- perhaps one that can even be discovered after death.

In-universe: Early Jedi discovered how to live on as ghosts after death, but this knowledge became lost to the main Jedi Order. Before his death in 32 BBY, Jedi Master [Qui-Gon Jinn](#) learned of this ability from a Shaman of the Whills, an ancient [order of Force-sensitives](#). As a ghost, he taught this technique to Yoda and Obi-Wan. They in turn helped [Anakin Skywalker](#) become a Force ghost when he returned to the light side of the Force.

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In general, being a Force ghost is only temporary. The spirits eventually have to pass on to the afterlife, where its exact fate is unknown to the living.

It's possible that they maintain some of their consciousness, or that they lose all individuality in the process of becoming one with [the Force](#).

[Sith](#) and other [dark side users](#) can sometimes preserve their spirits after death. It's unclear how this is different from a [Jedi](#) Force ghost, but the key might be a dark side ghost's tendency to be attached to a place or object in the physical world. This fits with the Sith philosophies on striving for physical immortality, while the Jedi believe instead in accepting death.

[Source: About Entertainment: Star Wars Glossary. <http://scifi.about.com/od/starwarsglossaryandfaq/a/Star-Wars-Glossary-Force-Ghost.htm>]