

Today is about one of the most controversial topics in the world of religion: the Trinity. Christians, sectarian almost from the beginning, quibbled about what it really meant. Other religions pointed to the idea of the Trinity and hooted because, according to them, Christianity wasn't a religion of only one god but of three.

After Mohamed and the growth of Islam, the criticism became louder. Christians met to seek to define what they really meant when they talked about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They developed a creed. But then they argued about one little word in the creed. The dispute was so serious that the church split into two parts, the East and the West.

Don't even dream that I will get into that argument. Instead, I'm going to investigate this little lesson we had in John. In that passage, Jesus says, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now."

The first time I read that I thought it was "you cannot hear them now". Not so. You cannot bear them now. He means they are not strong enough to withstand the concepts he has in mind. What could it be?

In order to get an idea, let's look at the larger context. This is a sound bite from an after dinner speech. After the Last Supper, Jesus cast a lot of gloom in the room.

In the first part of the speech he identified Judas as the one who would betray him. Then he went into the tough stuff. He warns them he will be with them only a little while longer. He forecasts Peter's triple denial. He warns them they will be hated, persecuted, and killed.

After all that he tells them they cannot bear the rest.

What words could be more difficult to bear?

Also in John there is the story of Nicodemus, the Pharisee, who went at night to see Jesus. He asked how he might see the kingdom of heaven. Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born again. What does he mean? There's a different story, one about a rich man who wants to know what he needs to do to be assured of a place in heaven. Jesus tells that man to give all his money to the poor. The rich man could not bear the thought of giving up his money.

Nicodemus, a Jew, believed he was born correctly, and Jesus is speaking nonsense. As Jesus expands on his response Nicodemus begins to see the point: he would have to change his way of viewing his position in Judaism and, like Jesus, work to correct the monetary, ritualistic, and idolatrous practices in the temple. Yet, Nicodemus was so convinced of the propriety of his beliefs that he went away from Jesus.

Two Sundays ago, Bud talked to us about the way we might have walled ourselves into ways of thinking that might resist change; we have no way out. We might become prisoners of outmoded or mistaken concepts and, because of the walls, we aren't open to self examination. We think inside the box instead of considering the possibility that the outside might provide additional guidance for our lives. In fact, to protect our beliefs, we become selective in our listening.

Both Nicodemus and the rich man were walled into their lives with no skylights or windows to let in the outside air. Everyone they dealt with reaffirmed them in their beliefs. If anyone said something that didn't confirm their beliefs, the sound couldn't penetrate the walls.

Here in the United States, the National Catastrophe, otherwise known as the Civil War, ended in 1865. Even during the war, Reconstruction of the South had begun, with several reconstructed state governments having been established. Lincoln wished to declare the restoration of national unity and the end of slavery.

That wasn't good enough for the radicals of the North. They won a sweeping victory in the election of 1866 and by 1867, overriding the

President's vetoes, implemented a degrading and punitive Reconstruction program.

Does it surprise you to learn that the 1868 declaration of a yearly national day to honor all the dead of the Civil War was not accepted graciously by the South? The date was May 30 and it was called Memorial Day.

Those in the South had their beliefs about the war, about the degrading actions of the North's so-called Reconstruction, about slavery, and about honoring their own dead.

In the First World War soldiers from both North and South lost their lives. After the Armistice, May 30 was changed to be in honor of the dead of all wars and the name was changed to Decoration Day.

The South accepted the change and included the date in their holiday lists, but many retained their days for honoring their own Civil War dead. In the years since 1868 and after a common war effort, both North and South allowed a bit of fresh air into the walls erected around their perceptions.

On May 30 in 1911 a 500-mile race was contested in Indianapolis. The next year the same thing happened. As it became an annual event it gained the name "the Memorial Day 500".

When the holiday changed from Memorial Day, the name of the race didn't change to the Decoration Day 500. After a few years with two names for the same holiday the Decoration Day faded into the history books. Even well-intentioned changes are difficult to accept.

Radio broadcasts of the auto race became very popular. The honoring of the dead took place mostly in the selling of Buddy poppies to school-children and on street corners.

On the years when May 30 fell on Monday or Friday, creating a 3-day weekend, Americans took to the roads. More attention was paid to how

many died on the highways than to putting flowers on graves of men and women killed in war.

The National Holiday Act took effect in 1971. Memorial Day became a floating holiday attached to the last Monday in May. The Memorial Day 500 moved to the Sunday of the Memorial Day weekend. No longer on Memorial Day, the race survived as the Indianapolis 500.

Many complained about these changes. Yet, other changes met with approval: charcoal briquettes, portable grilles and the affordable, larger charcoal grilles changed the day of honoring the war dead into a day for barbecues, baseball on television, and leisure. It seems less difficult to change ideas about leisure activities than to change beliefs and concepts.

Yet, even with the reliable year-to-year luxury of a 3-day weekend and time off, some found the change difficult to accept. You may not know this: 10 years ago a resolution called the “National Moment of Remembrance” took effect. This resolution asks that at 3 PM on Memorial Day, all Americans voluntarily pause and informally observe, in their own way, a moment of remembrance and respect. Tomorrow, I will try to remember to pause, at 3 PM.

Some of you know that at one time I was following a path to become an Episcopal priest. From the time I was 16 until I was 22, that was my intent. What changed me? A very good friend took me to a retreat in a Catholic retreat house. There I read pamphlets which very clearly stated that only Catholics were going to heaven. My weak knowledge of other religions did include the awareness that they pretty much all demanded exclusive membership to avoid a trip to the furnaces down below.

Maybe my conscience was telling me I did not have the capability to come up with a new sermon every week and maybe I was just confounded by the conflict between religions. No matter what, I knew they could not all be right; maybe none of them were. Maybe they were all wrong. If so, my planned for role as a religious leader seemed like hypocrisy. Now I see I had been living in a box of blind belief and the walls had fallen.

Consider, I was only 22.

I escaped from organized religion.

Over a span of many years, I read books about Buddhism and Zen and Confucianism and the Tao. Eventually I found a little door in the negative box I had built around myself.

The door led to the consideration of the nature of god and the elements of religion. I can't say I changed my mind about anything in a big hurry and I can't say I am finished shedding light and fresh air into all of the moldering concepts locked into my head. I do know that, because I opened a door in the walls around my beliefs, I have been able to change my thinking.

So, what are some of the things I understand, or partly understand, that I formerly rejected? Perhaps, like me, you appreciated the sermon offered by Lyle Grosjean last week. He suggested that other religions might also be of god – the same god we have in the Episcopal version of Christianity. That perhaps the Holy Spirit has visited others, though under different names.

Over all the years since I gave up on my calling to ordination I have gradually come to understand that god is something we cannot understand. Though god is beyond my comprehension, I know god is too big to be confined to one religion; that all religions experience god in their own unique ways. None is superior to any other. God inspires them all.

Each week we pray for peace, yet this is a common practice in all religions. Religion is about peace. None has a monopoly on asking for it. Sadly, every religion has extremists who feel justified in using force to deliver their religious message. Perhaps the beliefs of these people are tightly protected from outside influence and everything they observe confirms their understanding of god's will.

From Nicodemus and the rich man to the radicals in the North and former slave owners in the South to the evolution of Memorial Day to my own round the horn experience with religion we have seen that we resist changing our understanding of the world around us.

Perhaps it was some sort of global change that Jesus meant when he said the disciples could not bear what he did not tell them.

The disciples, all Jews, were not ready to withstand the idea that they might, perhaps be called upon to go amongst the gentiles. Yet, Jesus went among the Samaritans, people who were considered almost as bad as gentiles. Knowing as we do, the story of the good Samaritan, it is difficult for us to understand the frictions between them and the Jews. After all, they shared ancestors. The Samaritans descended from those Israelites who avoided the exile to Babylon. They claimed their Israelite religion was the authentic one and that Judaism became tainted by the time spent in Babylon. There was animosity between these peoples. Maybe the Jews had an attitude of having suffered and saw the Samaritans as something like draft dodgers. Yet Jesus went among them.

Just as Nicodemus did not want to think of changing his views as an official of the church, it would be difficult for the disciples to see the gentiles, whom they had been brought up to see as “wrongly born”, as someone to honor. For them, at that time, the sharing of the Good News meant nothing. So far there was no Good News. In fact, in this after dinner speech, there was mostly bad news.

Like the disciples, we are inclined to think of people stereotypically. Asians, African-Americans, Blacks, Muslims, gays, lesbians, unwed mothers, Latinos, and so forth. Some of us may have less polite names for these people. We see someone who isn't dressed like we think a person ought to be dressed or whose skin color or mannerisms are not like ours and, instead of seeing a person we see a category of person. We may have walls built around our perception of that type of person and we are unable to refresh that version. If that person happens to be walking toward St. Peter's we might think, “what is that person doing

here!” Well, who knows, that person could be someone like me, returning to church after 35 years’ absence.

Many of us have escaped from some of these walled-in places of mental confinement. As for me? I’m working on it. Some of it is very hard to bear.