

Christoph Keller, III
SUMMA Closing Eucharist
Trinity Cathedral
March 2, 2013

I am who I am.

Theology is “faith seeking understanding”; and, as Karl Barth told us, a theologian who does not have a sense of humor, does not understand.

When Moses asks God: “What’s your name?” God’s reply from the burning bush is sly. God is teaching Moses, and playing with him too. Throughout the Bible, God is teaching and sometimes playing with us too. That is why, in SUMMA, we mix theology with bowling. Both have to do with understanding God.

I dreamed up SUMMA on a rainy day, as I was thinking about a problem.

As an Episcopalian, I am a Christian in the liberal tradition. Liberal Christians have seen the church as needing to change to recognize the advance of civilization: progress in science, for example, and expansion of rights. My father was a bishop in this Cathedral, and here he ordained the Rev. Peggy Bosmyer, one of the first women priests in the history of the Anglican tradition. My scholarly work accepts Darwinian evolution as a scientific premise and proceeds from there. Of such developments, liberal Christianity is made. If we were to debate whether the liberal tradition has contributed positively to the cause of Jesus Christ, I would gladly argue the affirmative.

But SUMMA is a project in another vein. I see the church as needing to change to recognize the decline of faith. Polls and attendance statistics show that faith’s imprint on our culture is shrinking by the year. That requires deepening of faith from us. It was relatively easy to be a Christian in America fifty years ago. For the next fifty years, it is going to take a little brainwork.

Our problem in the church is not that we do not understand or appreciate the world. The world oozes from our pores. What movies, music, science and politics can teach us, we know. What Lady Gaga tweets, we know. What golf, yoga, a balanced diet, and Ritalin can do for us, we know. What scholars say today about literature, history, anthropology, and religion, you are beginning to learn in earnest.

For you, my young friends—so bright, so full of life, so fun—knowing such things is not in question. The question is whether you will know them in faith.

SUMMA is founded on confidence that knowledge and reason are friendly to faith. Learning to question claims, ask for evidence, and examine warrants, may free you from the grip of fashionable thinking. Discovering the range, subtlety and rigor of Aquinas, and Barth’s sly humor and imagination, may incline you to take advancing

civilization with a dash of salt. Most important, this theological tradition can guide you into a deeper love and appreciation for the gospel.

Consider the Epistle and Gospel readings for this evening: difficult texts for our modern ears. Speaking of Moses and the children of Israel in the wilderness, Paul writes:

We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents.

Our advancing civilization rolls its eyes. In interpreting such a text, we seem to be faced with a dilemma. Either we accept the Bible when it suggests that God kills not only sinners, but their children, for acts of idolatry and sexual behavior that are roughly a day in the life of the Rolling Stones; or, we deny Paul's interpretation of scripture, which seems to reject its authority as the Word of God.

On the first option, faith might start looking at every terrorist attack or hurricane as an act of divine judgment on the United States. On the second, faith, detached from its source, is left aimless, bereft. In that aforementioned debate regarding the liberal contribution to the cause of Christ, were I assigned the negative, I would pitch my tent on that problem.

SUMMA will try to guide you between the horns of that dilemma, through knowledge of the theological tradition. You may remember from camp that we briefly discussed Richard Hooker's three-fold cord of scripture, reason and tradition. (It's in your notebooks.) Scripture is indispensable to faith as the revelation of the gospel, and reason is needed in its interpretation. For example, reason looks to places in scripture where the meaning is clear to shed light on passages where the meaning is cloudy.

Concerning sin and judgment, where is the meaning clear?

In an old Episcopal tradition, there was a moment in the communion service called "the comfortable words." The priest would say them just after the confession, when the entire congregation had just admitted that, for the umpteenth time, we had done things we should not do, and not done things we should have. After announcing pardon and remission, the priest would say:

Hear what comfortable words our Saviour Christ saith unto all who truly turn to him. "Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you." (Matt 11:28) "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, to the end that all that believe in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." (John 3:16) Hear also what St. Paul saith. "This is a true saying, and worthy of all to be receive, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." (1 Tim. 1:15) Hear also what St. John saith: "If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and

he is the propitiation for our sins, and not ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world."

Concerning sin and judgment, what could be more clear?

Now let's go a little deeper. According to Barth, we haven't understood the comfort in such words, until we have also understood their challenge. The gospel is chock full of challenging comfort and comforting challenge. God's justice is merciful, and his mercy just. The philosophers' word for this way of thinking is "dialectic." Hegel is the great dialectical philosopher. Barth's theology is dialectical from head to toe. He has us read the Bible through binoculars, using both eyes instead of only one. SUMMA wants to give you those binoculars.

Now let's go yet a little deeper. The gospel is the announcement of what Barth called "the fact indicated in the name Emmanuel." God sees our world, our advancing civilization, its deep tumult and distress. God doesn't pass us by, as the priest and the Levite passed by the man who had fallen among thieves on the road to Jericho. "He doesn't leave us to [our] own devices," writes Barth. "He makes [our] situation his own." CD IV.1, 158.

With binoculars, there are two viewpoints from which to consider this gospel. With the left eye, Jesus is the story of God's sharing in our uncertainty and weakness, culminating in the cross. We come to know Jesus as our companion, teacher, prophet, and guide. With our right eye, Jesus is the story of our human sharing in God's certain truth and strength—culminating in the resurrection. We know Jesus as our Savior and our Lord. Seeing Christ from both perspectives: divinely human, humanly divine, we fully understand.

This brings us back to Moses. The words from the burning bush are playfully tautological. Strictly speaking, "I am who I am" means nothing. According to the gospel, Jesus Christ is God's message to the world: "From before all worlds, this is who I am." Thus, the enigmatic, playful saying from the burning bush is fleshed out as the fact indicated in the name Emmanuel.

God in Jesus Christ doesn't punish children for their parent's sins. The world does, often, and we may sometimes too. The atomic bomb at Hiroshima would be a case in point. In Christ, we know that God does not give, nor judge as we do. With Christian faith, that much is given.

What then about those serpents and the wrath of God—does this gospel make all that disappear? We will hold that question now for further exploration later. I might here say this: last summer, you got a taste of Gregory of Nyssa, the church father who often interpreted such passages allegorically and spiritually, as depicting struggles in the soul. Or we might interpret them more literally than that, while drawing from Paul's letter to the Romans an understanding of the wrath of God as the result when God leaves the world to stew in its own juices. Jesus' warning in

tonight's gospel can fit that interpretation. We can also look profitably to Aquinas and Barth for help on this front, though I can tell you that understanding divine providence dialectally is the work of more than one rainy afternoon. My point is that there is wisdom here, gold in this tradition, and it is yours for the taking.

We hope that this first year of SUMMA, now ending, has given you at least a nugget for your pocket. We hope you found yourself strengthened and encouraged in your faith, and clearer minded. We hope you've had fun, and laughed. We hope that something deep within that laughter has you wanting more.