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St. John's Episcopal Church  
Trinity Sunday

## WHAT LINES ARE FOR

Ella is very smart ... but not human... really. She is our GPS (Global Positioning System). Her voice is a little cranky, like she's sipping lemon juice, and she repeats everything. But she knows exactly what she is doing ... most of the time. I trust her completely ... almost. I purchased Ella to reduce the stress of finding new places.

Recently, Deborah and I drove to Boston for a major family celebration. I couldn't wait to punch in our destination, 42 Beacon Street, and then let Ella take over. Let the fun begin! Since we knew the first part of the trip we "muted" Ella. As we got closer to 128 and 95, I expected her to tell us to continue on the Mass Pike right to its end in the heart of Boston and then take us in from there. But apparently that's not what she wanted. She directed us another way, which surprised me. But she knows what she's doing and I *think* I know what I'm doing.

That was the beginning of an unexpected adventure. There were wrong turns, Ella's constant "recalculating", constant changes on short notice, and 4-5 stressful rotaries. It was now rush hour on a Friday in Boston. I slipped down into the vortex of white-knuckled compulsivity. Ella *had* to be right, I thought. She's a pro. Deborah had her suspicions early on. I felt like I'd been blindfolded and turned round and around. I had no idea where I was, even though I grew up in the Boston area. Ella did get us to 42 Beacon Street but it was the wrong one.

We stopped and Deborah punched in the address again. This time Zip codes popped up. There were, in fact, quite a few Beacon Streets! So we set off again. It was oddly comforting to see something as familiar as Blue Hill in Milton on the horizon, but also a hilarious shock, since Blue Hill is about 30-40 minutes from our destination. The muscles in my neck felt like they were about to pop. Feeling like Job, I yelled something unflattering at Ella as if she were a human being or perhaps a demi-goddess. Deborah confirmed the *correct* 42 Beacon Street and we proceeded more directly to our destination.

The interesting thing is that Ella was taking us through urban neighborhoods that I recognized from growing up in Milton. It was a potent re-education. In this part of the city, the neighborhoods are primarily black, mostly poor and much larger than I remember. Many people were out on their stoops or hanging out on the sidewalk to catch a little breeze on a hot day. At one point, we passed half a dozen police cars with their blue and red lights flashing. A crowd gathered as a young man was being cuffed and arrested. Sad.

Some hallmarks of this area are poverty, under-privilege and scant opportunities. Most likely you could add crime, fear, addiction and poor education to the list. We were on our way to Beacon Hill, a stronghold of establishment privilege, high education, wealth and upwardly mobile professionals. There is such a chasm between these two worlds only a few miles apart.

I was reminded once again of the world of privilege, opportunity and assumed entitlement of which I am a part. From our accidental journey, I learned that Ella is *not* perfect, is not to be trusted completely, nor is her operator! While our era and culture love technology, we give ourselves away to it far too easily. Be careful what you worship. "Where you treasure is, there will your heart be also". As they say, "Mistakes were made", and I

gained a little humility. My original idea was that our trip to Boston and Beacon Hill would be a straight line with few surprises. Through no conscious act of courage, we blundered way outside the narrow lines I had in mind. Some adventures we take intentionally knowing the risks. Others happen *to* us and don't feel that great. In either case, interesting things may happen when we leave the familiar, linear paths we so love. Our destination was really important to us (and we did arrive in time). But a journey is much more than a destination and a destination should not be mistaken for destiny.

So what happens when you go outside the rules, laws, traditions and doctrines that you learned growing up?

My early formation in the Christian faith was in Milton, MA at St. Michael's Church. There I went to Sunday School and was Confirmed. I learned the catechesis of the Episcopal Church. I memorized the Nicene Creed and absorbed the doctrine of the Trinity. I did not doubt or challenge what I learned, nor would it have occurred to me to do so. The traditions and doctrines of the Church, though inflexible, were a safe place to begin my spiritual journey. One could rely upon the boundaries, customs and belief systems that had been passed on for centuries. They were as solid as the ancient stones used to build the Neo-Gothic church building itself. Of course, now I see that even stones can be moved or rearranged.

As a child and adolescent I was surrounded by Christians and by Christian thinking. I benefitted enormously from this environment and found several religious role models who helped shape my budding spiritual life. Growing up within the rules and boundaries was basically a good thing. (This was right before the 60s). But like the doctrine of the Trinity, the limits were limiting and the lines drawn too linear. Just a quick reminder, the doctrine of the Trinity was not anything Jesus taught or encouraged. He was engaged in his passion, that is, raising awareness about the kingdom of God; healing, teaching how let go of whatever we grasp, and compassionately identifying with the outcast and the poor. He did not talk about himself as the Son of God. Rather, he referred to himself as the "Son of Man", *anthropos* in Greek, meaning a full or complete human being. He was not interested in doctrines about himself.

300 years after he died, the male leaders of the church were struggling to come to terms with matters of orthodoxy (right belief) and orthopraxis (right practice). There were serious disagreements over the nature of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit and how the three inter-relate. Out of the Council of Nicea in 324 came a ruling and a ruler for measuring orthodoxy. God was the Father, Jesus was the Son, and the Holy Spirit was the Holy Spirit. Jesus was one with God, that is, one and the same substance (*homoousia*). There was disagreement about the hierarchy and pecking order of these three attested aspects of God. Jesus and God were equal and the Holy Spirit was subordinate to them. Remember the line in the Nicene Creed where it says, "*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son*"? This "proceeding" signifies a lower rank. Believing passionately that the three persons of the Trinity were all equal, a large portion of the church, later to be known as the Eastern Orthodox Church, split off from Rome in 1054.

Easter showed that God cannot be put in a tomb or any kind of box. I am not sure that God even likes doctrines, straight lines and laws. At least not as much as God loves love itself, creativity and creation itself. It should be observed that the Trinity has no specifically feminine representative. I suppose one could argue for the androgyny of the Holy Spirit. But gender neutrality still misses a vital part of the Godhead, namely the feminine. You will notice

in the verses of today's Communion Hymn that God is referred to in a variety of ways. If we limit ourselves to even *those* diverse perceptions of divinity, we are still short-changing God and ourselves.

The graphic on the cover of the bulletin today is a holistic representation of God. There is the pyramid with its straight lines and sharp angles, a traditional symbol of the Trinity favoring the masculine. Then there three circles overlapping the triangle, denoting something rounder, softer and feminine. The circles and the triangle are embraced by one large circle, suggesting a divinity without gender, a God greater than our intellectual constructs and projections. The whole graphic is theologically healthy and sound. But it's still only a graphic!

Receiving the traditions and doctrines of the church as a youth at St. Michael's was helpful. They provided a safe playpen. But eventually, we outgrow the playpen and want to get out and explore the world; perhaps not *exactly* the way Ella led us to Beacon Street. As Paul writes, we want solid food and not milk. I would not say that the rules of right doctrine and right practice are made just to be broken. In the first half of our spiritual journey they provide something firm to hold onto amidst the hair-raising stuff life throws our way. Permissiveness and undisciplined laxity are not the answer.

Children need both conditional love *and* unconditional love. (*Falling Upward* by Richard Rohr) However, going beyond the rules and challenging youthful precepts is where the second phase of the spiritual journey begins. We need the rules to push against, and in the pushing there is growth. There is also suffering. According to the Genesis Creation myth, God gave Adam and Eve really clear instructions *not* to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. If they did, they would die. When they ate of it and God banished them from the garden, their real voyage began. Robert Frost wrote, "Good fences make good neighbors." But eventually, if we are to embark on the journey for which we are made, the fences and boundaries must be crossed and neighbors must be met.

For a certain developmental and spiritual season, the doctrine of the Trinity provides a steady foothold, but the point of a foothold, I believe, is to help you get to something higher and larger.

Anyone want to go to 42 Beacon Street? Somewhere else?  
I know an excellent guide ... and it's not Ella.