

- A reading from the Gospel according to St. John. And when the counselor comes, that one will convince the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment. Concerning sin because they do not believe in me. Concerning righteousness because I go to the Father, and you will see me no more. Concerning judgment because the ruler of this world is judged. I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the spirit of truth comes, that spirit will guide you into all the truth, for the spirit will not speak independently but will speak only what the spirit hears and will declare to you the things that are to come. The spirit will glorify me by making what is mine and declaring it to you. All that God has is mine. Therefore I said that the spirit will take what is mine and declare it to you. This ends the reading of the Gospel.

- Good morning. It is very good to be back at Duke. Feels quite natural. Do you believe the right things about God? If you belong to the Christian group, does your understanding of how God is three-in-one and one-in-three qualify as orthodox? That last word means right opinion or straight as opposed to crooked thought. Do you believe the correct things in the correct way? This may strike you as a fairly abrasive set of questions for a guest, however familiar with the place, to bring before a gathering of people who not only got themselves up and out on Sunday morning but probably are not even planning deeply serious evil and destruction for the afternoon. But there are these Biblical texts, and I am accountable to them. They are the Biblical texts appointed for Trinity Sunday. In that passage from the Gospel of John that you just heard, Jesus tells his disciples that the coming of the Paraclete will be a visitation by the spirit of truth and a judgment. Those who think and believe the truth are choosing to live in light, those who do not, the darkness, the place or the condition in which life or at least abundant life is not found. And from that passage, from Paul's letter to the Romans, there is this assertion about what happened to us whether we were ready or not. And it begins with a phrase, a phrase easily bent, often bent, to suggest that we had better be straight about what counts as religious truth. The claim that you and I are justified by faith has sometimes been turned into a test of whether the faith we hold is a set of beliefs consistent and correct enough to get us justified. Or more crudely, do you believe in the way you need to believe in order, as the roadside signs in this part of the country used to say, get right with the One we call God? One reason I was invited to be here today, it's certainly not because this is a celebrity weekend. One reason I was invited to be here today is that I know, I know something about the warfare that stands in history behind Trinity Sunday and even behind the prospect of singing Holy, Holy, Holy. I even wrote a book about the villain whose beliefs were censored at a council of Nicaea in the fourth century. And Will Willimon and some others at Duke even recognized that my fascination with Arius, the fourth-century arch-heretic was not advocacy, and I do appreciate that when I meet it. I owe it to them and to you not to delve into doctrinal disputes in the early church. Why should Sunday worshipers entitled to good luncheon plans be subjected to a verbal lobotomy by a historian? Yet I will, I will mention that several centuries passed after the death and resurrection of Jesus before a majority of the faithful concluded that they had hit on the right formulas for describing the God of Christian experience, a sovereign divine life manifest in the Father, Son, and Spirit, one in essence, three persons. Though I should say that early Christian thinkers, better than some moderns, knew that

ascribing gender to deity was strange and figurative. One God in Trinity, there you have a description of the God, it is agreed, we cannot finally capture in our language or our thought, God, the Holy One. But, of course, agreement among religious people is hard to gain. Battles continued after the fourth and fifth century councils, which we, by hindsight, consider conclusive. Think about it. If some have the doctrine right, some others must not. If someone grasps or claims to grasp the Christian doctrine of God fully, others will be accused of having only partial understanding. Question, how crucial, how crucial is doctrinal correctness? Is it a matter of life or death? Is it a matter of salvation or damnation? Does God withhold what God gives from those who do not think and believe correctly? Whether we speak directly or by our body language, our different religious groups, Christian groups decidedly among these, our different religious groups convey that those who do not see things in ways closely like ours are at least deprived or less than saved. But we mean to say more. By our very existence as distinct groups, we mean to say more, for in standing apart and in being indifferent to learning or crediting the faith of others, we give the judgment, we give the judgment that those who do not believe as we believe are in serious serious jeopardy. They are in endangered. They are lost. They are damned. A convocation of over 1,000 Native Americans took place on the campus of Stanford University last week. And I was asked to join in blessing the grounds on which this annual powwow was to be held. A fellow holy person was the primary bringer of blessing. And while this man, Arvol Looking Horse, chanted and said his prayers prior to lighting the sacred pipe of which he is the Sioux Nation guardian, I remembered an earlier event in which this same man sat on a panel with representatives from other religions, answering student questions. Students have a refreshing way of forcing smooth talkers to fess up, to declare themselves. And on this night, each panelist was asked to respond at whatever length, but finally with a clear yea or nay, asked to respond to this question. Is your religion a way to truth, or is your religion the only path to salvation, the one true way? Arvol Looking Horse, when the question came to him, closed his eyes and fell silent for quite a while. And the moderator, anxious, restated the question, and that did not stir Arvol immediately to speak. But when he finally did open his mouth, he said, "The Sioux way is the only way I know." His answer had the ring of truth and a kind of modesty other panelists might have tried on for size. The one true way? The only way I know. Is God a doctrine checker? Are we to imagine a date in which God will assume the manner and the method of a not very imaginative doctoral examiner? Please tell me, Mr. or Ms. Believer, precisely how you conceive of me under the following six headings. Is a test in the cards for each of us, and might it be a test in which the questions anticipate, presume, and will accommodate a single series of answers fixed, invariable, and purely true? Wouldn't you find, wouldn't you find a matching quiz or a fill-in-the-blanks exercise on your God concept a weak climax, in fact, a disappointing anticlimax to the riddles and wonders which have filled your life? A God who measured life and its meanings on these grounds and took the results seriously would seem to us too shallow or too clueless to have been the source of the life we have in fact enjoyed. Four out of six young couples with whom I was discussing the baptism of their new babies surprised me two weeks ago by expressing their pain at having been estranged and separated from church community for years. Common to their stories was a sharp sense of being disapproved or in their youth being made to feel that they could not be accepted in church as they were with the active curiosities and in the awakening bodies they possessed. And so they were among the millions distanced from religious life and yet nagged with a form of longterm homesickness. And yet they were also resentful of having been stiff-armed in the name of a God they now wanted to believe cares about their children. What turned them away? It seems that what turned them away was their churches, their various churches' claims about what was required in order for

one to be a member in a community of truth. Imagine, for example, believing or being led to believe that the desire to marry someone of another group, even another Christian group, disqualifies you from receiving what God gives. Were these young parents doctrinally sharp? Were they sharp enough to be worthy to make vows for their babies? I don't have the faintest idea. Did they trust or were they trying to trust that a love exists to enfold their children and to be with those children as they grow into their lives? Yes. A few years ago, 35 or 40 yards from here, in the Divinity School in a classroom, there was a discussion about evidences for the existence and the activities of God. And this discussion grew intense and for some people in the room, difficult, even agonizing. In the middle of this discussion, which really had become a debate, one person captured everyone else's attention by making a very direct point in very direct language. The point was about a certain kind of activity that is found among some religious people, particularly the seriously religious. Some theological statements and broodings, this woman remarked, begin to take on an idolatrous feel, as if God's existence and effect hinged upon our abilities to think God right. She said she found it helpful to recall that if God is, and if God lives up to billing, that will be that, with God's reality not dependent upon our willingness or our ability to keep the idea and the dream alive. Give God a break I think she meant to say and do yourself a favor as well. Hard and careful thinking as a good and salutary, as a good and salutary human activity? No doubt a good thing. Correct thought as the reason for being cared about by God, and orthodox belief as the source of our own justification and salvation? Easy to doubt. Easy to doubt given the range and mystery of our experiences and the range of our thoughts and words for making sense and perhaps giving thanks for our experiences. All of this brings me back to the first passage we heard today, Proverbs 8, and a few words in that passage concerned with God's wisdom, what it does, for how long it has been being and doing God's wisdom, how wisdom spends divine time. This particular text from Proverbs 8 was disputed and contested in those fourth century days when Christians debated whether the Son of God was eternal, divine in nature, or a creature. Wisdom says the Lord created me at the beginning of God's way, the first of the acts of old. Ages ago, I was set up at the first, before the beginning of the earth. In the early church days in which people thought about the difference between God and humans in categories of essences or natures, divine nature as distinct from human nature, one way of imagining God's transaction with us through Christ was expressed in this way. God's wisdom who is God's eternal Son who became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth is divine in nature, is in possession of divine holiness and power, and in that capacity as God, God's wisdom brought help from above and in becoming human, infused our humanity with saving divinity. It is a wonderful way of picturing what God does in love, in a reach of compassion toward human beings in every conceivable kind of need and trouble. If you wished to believe correctly, at least in one set of fourth-century categories, that would not be a bad starting point. But I have been, I have been hinting steadily that the preoccupation with getting beliefs exactly right smacks more of the human desire for control than with definitive divine activity. Yes, it is important to know who is God and who and what do not qualify as God, that is, are not worthy of your trust. Idolatry is dangerous because it seeks life support from what cannot support life. Yes, it is important to respond to a call urgently put in the first century and urgent today to know who God is and among what groups of beleaguered people God is most likely to be most directly involved in Passover, in deliverance from captivity. Is it likely, though, that God is most concerned with moving people to right opinions about God-ness? It is fashionable in establishment political and religious circles these days to single out for attack single-issue and special-interest individuals and groups. Has it occurred to the newer champions of religious orthodoxy and right practice to question whether they may not be dancing dangerously close to fashioning God into a single-issue personage, a

doctrine checker? It seems strange to me at least to have rambled around with reverence in scripture and in tradition and to have come up with the notion that God cares most of all about the correctness of our belief, that orthodoxy is decisive, that is, decisive for the way in which God regards and treats that part of the created order that is capable of judging and giving assent to ideas. Consider just for a moment this picture from Proverbs 8. It is a picture of how a holy God in wisdom spends time. From the beginning of creation, the wisdom of God is about the daily business, and here is what the text says, is about the daily business of rejoicing in God's inhabited world and delighting in humankind. Rejoicing in God's inhabited world and delighting in humankind. However we imagine God or God active or God with a plan, this little phrase from Proverbs 8 points to something basic in the One we count as our life-giver and life-definer, rejoicing and delighting, taking pleasure in the world inhabited by living things and enjoying the likes of you and me. If we were to take seriously the idea that salvation means having the image of God in ourselves recovered and restored, it would mean that you and I could imitate that activity of God's wisdom, that you and I could ourselves daily be about rejoicing in the inhabited world and delighting in humankind. And how would the great commandment sound to us? It might be the mandate to love the God who in wise love rejoices in the world and delights in the likes of us and secondly to take pleasure in each other as in ourselves. If our reflex is to resist rejoicing and delighting as activities not serious enough to be religious or perhaps a bit self-indulgent, okay for God, perhaps on God's Sunday but not right for me, not in keeping with the way I was taught religion, perhaps the only remedy is to hear the challenge repent and believe the Gospel. Repent and believe the Gospel about a life-giver who rejoices and delights in all that is and all who exist even in the broken, incomplete, unfinished, and sometimes tragic conditions you and I know clearly to be our conditions. It is the same wisdom of God who not only urged us to rejoice with those who rejoice but to weep also with those who weep and also the same wisdom, who in the flesh, embraced life, containing all there is in the way of sorrow and joy. It is that same wisdom, who from the first before the beginning of the earth, has taken pleasure in who we are and takes pleasure in who, by the love which will not be frustrated, we finally will be. Whatever other interests can be detected in the wisdom sung about as God's wisdom, this one is fairly unmistakable and clear. If you and I believe ourselves to have been redeemed or believe ourselves at the point of being claimed by a presence and power you might call God, we should be able to find in ourselves something of what has been at work in God's wisdom from the beginning, rejoicing in our lives in the inhabited world and delighting in humankind. Delighting in humankind, all of humanity, all of our lives, all of it, all that was made, all that has fallen apart, all that is under repair, all that will be raised up. God is good and faithful. And God is the One, who out of love more than out of logic, makes our life together a cause for rejoicing and delight. Amen.