

“Blessed Trinity”

Romans 8: 12-17, John 3:1-17

Trinity Sunday, June 11, 2206

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Today is Trinity Sunday. For those of us who follow the Lectionary and try our best to live within the rhythm of the church year, this is the one-day where we ponder a teaching of the church rather than a teaching of Jesus. Nowhere in the New Testament will you find a declaration, definition, or delineation of the Trinity. The scriptural lessons for today reflect the three in one doctrine: God as Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. However, they do not define it. That task is left to the faithful.

Although the mystery of God revealed in three ways is at the very heart of our Christian faith, so many of us struggle to speak intelligently of it. Perhaps we should cut ourselves a bit of slack on this account. After all, it took the great church father Augustine many decades and ten lengthy volumes to articulate his understanding of the Trinity. In our compulsion to define and make sense of this indefinable mystery we have used many different metaphors and images. The image of water has been used with some degree of success. This common earthly element exists in three forms, solid, liquid and gas, three forms yet one substance. However, no image or description ever seems to help us make complete sense of that which is at its core a mystery.

That does not mean however, that this sacred mystery is not worthy of our theological struggle. The trinity, after all, is what distinguishes us from our Jewish ancestors. Those early Christians experienced something that their Jewish sisters and brothers did not. They encountered God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and knew that God was present to them even after his death and departure in the form of the Holy Spirit. This experience of God’s love, three yet one, was worth dying for, worth living for, worthy loving for. It was very powerful and very real.

Our struggle is not in accepting that God made Godself known to the world in three distinct ways. Our struggle is trying to describe this to someone else. Imagine yourself talking about this with someone who has never heard of Jesus. There is God who created all things, who also came to live among us in the form of a man named Jesus, who then remained among us as a

Spirit that impacts our life, but which we can never see? After all, is that not the essence of our faith, trusting in things unseen? While there are formulations in the Scriptures that can be called Trinitarian (for example Matt. 28:19, 2 Cor. 13:13), the Trinity as a doctrine, or teaching is not found anywhere in Scripture, at least not as a developed concept. The doctrine of the Trinity was formulated and articulated centuries later. The second century teacher and theologian Tertullian, was the first to give the concept a name with the word *trinitas* that speaks of “three persons of one substance.” However, full development of the doctrine of the Trinity came later with the Council of Nicea in the fourth century.

Many teachers and preachers have reached for different words and images to interpret the Trinity. For example, the Presbyterian minister David H.C. Read expresses the Trinity as “God everywhere and always, God there and then, and God here and now.” Anthony Robinson in the chapter on the Trinity in his recent book, “What’s Theology got to do with It?” uses a different image of water to describe the Trinity. He says, “God the Creator or Father might be thought of as similar to groundwater. Such water is not ordinarily visible to us, yet it is always present. These deep waters move and flow beneath the earth. Life itself depends upon these unseen groundwaters. At a particular location on the earth’s surface and at a point in time, a spring appears a site where the groundwater wells up to become visible. Jesus Christ, to continue the analogy is like that spring. He is the visible revealing—the manifestation of God in a particular life, at a particular point in time, and at a particular place. But the water that bubbles to the surface in this spring does not remain there. This water flows forth in a river or stream and divides into other streams, which convey the waters of grace to different places and at different times. Such is the Holy Spirit, God’s presence throughout the world and across history.” (Robinson, p. 65)

Like all metaphors, this one has its limitations, admits Robinson, and may breakdown if pushed too far. However, I find this water image a helpful way to envision the mystery and complexity of the Trinity. God is the Mysterious and Unnamable One whom we trust but cannot see, like the groundwater. God is revealed uniquely in the particular life of Jesus, in his words and deeds, in his life and death and resurrection, like the stream that emanates from the water. And God continues to guide the lives of the faithful through the presence of the Holy Spirit. Like the wind or the river, the Spirit blows or winds itself where it will. Not three gods, but one God

made known to us in three ways. Ultimately whatever words or images we use, nothing can sufficiently capture the essence of this mystery.

What then does the Trinity have to do with postmodern Christians? Is it something to ponder once a year or does it articulate something deeper and more fundamental to our faith? We tend to relate more easily to a particular member of the Trinity. For example, you might relate more easily to God the Creator or Jesus the one who lived among us, or the Holy Spirit that is present to us this very day. For some people, the traditional language used to describe the Trinity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit has become a stumbling block. Therefore, some people have advocated for the use of less patriarchal language. Others prefer to use language that speaks of the functions of the three: Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier and in so doing, lose the distinctive relational element of the Trinity. The issue of language is significant. For some people, the language is essential. One is not permitted to tinker with the traditional language or it all falls apart. As long as people are passionate about the Trinity, the conversation and debates will continue, and well they should.

Language and tradition are important, however, in our zeal to uphold tradition we can so easily miss the point. Perhaps instead of explaining how these three things are really one thing, or insisting on the use of traditional formulations, we might try to do what the doctrine of the Trinity was originally formulated to do: give words to our faith. As contemporary Christians, we must be ready to witness to others about what we believe and why we believe it. The early Christians, living in a hostile world, needed to put some definitive language to what they believed Christ had revealed to them. Christians living today in a hostile world need to do the same. So often we are afraid to get it wrong, to look ignorant or uninformed, therefore, we shy away from talking about theological topics like the Trinity.

When speaking of the doctrine of the Trinity what is most important is not necessarily the language we use, but what that language depicts. It is the relationship, the holy mystery of being three yet one, and it is the love that is the source of our being that is most important. The Trinity speaks mysteriously and profoundly about relationships; Creator, to Christ, to Spirit. Language is significant. Images are informative. However, it is equally important to consider the truth that lies behind such language and imagery. The writer Penelope Mark-Stuart says, “the truth behind the Trinity, I believe, lies in one of the first Scripture verses we ever learned, (I

John 3:16) *God is love*. The Trinity, then, is love—love seeking infinite expression. When it comes to a description of this God who is Love even the greatest theologian is left babbling like a child, for human language can never ultimately capture God’s essence. But that’s no reason not to try. God is not offended at our metaphors as long as we don’t mistake the picture for the Truth.”

She says, “the key is to look past our metaphors of God and even our own particular experiences of God to the Love who lives at the heart of it all—the Love who created our world and fashioned us with such care, the Love who passionately desired to become one of us and for a little while pitched his tent among us; and the Love who could not ultimately leave us but remains with us to inhabit every moment of our existence.” This is what it means to say “God is Love.” This is perhaps how we might come to understand the incomprehensible mystery of the Trinity. Beyond all language, beyond all mystery, there is Love. The love that was, is, and will forever be made real to us in our experience of God.

Without the Trinity, we might easily become Unitarian, favoring one expression of God over another. Without the Trinity holding us accountable, we might be tempted to worship a one-dimensional deity. However, if we only relate to the Deity in the first person, as the Creator, how much we miss. If we focus myopically on our personal relationship with Jesus Christ, we miss the God of history, that still speaking and ever creating God yet at work creating and loving us. If we measure our faith upon having an ecstatic experience of the Holy Spirit and it does not happen that way, are we then inferior Christians. The Trinity keeps us more than honest. Our celebration and appreciation for this sacred mystery keeps our faith lives from being malnourished and incomplete.

The Trinity is central to our faith, especially today because we do not worship a process, but a provider who continues to create and move among us. Our God is awesome God, who chose to be made known to us in a rich, diverse experience of the three in One, as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, Mother, Son and Holy Spirit. At the heart of this sacred mystery is Love, a love that seeks to be in relationship with the world, a love beyond all other love we might know. Our willingness to ponder this sacred mystery and then share what we know to be true with others is what keeps our faith alive. Without this witness, without such testimony others may never come to know of this mighty God. Go ahead, jump head-first into those theological

waters. You have nothing to fear. In return, you might come to appreciate an aspect of God you would not otherwise have considered. Praise be to God, the three in one, blessed Trinity! Amen

Sources:

Mary W. Anderson, "So Explain it to Me." sermon on the Trinity, Christian Century, May 20-27, 1999.

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Anthony B. Robinson, "What's Theology God to do with It?: Convictions, Vitality and the Church," The Alban Institute, 2006.