

“Where we experience the Holy”
2 Corinthians 13: 11-13, Matthew 28: 16-20
Trinity Sunday/A, May 18, 2008
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Last week was Pentecost Sunday and we explored the gift of the Holy Spirit that was given to the early church. The Holy Spirit is mentioned many times in Scripture. Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit to guide and empower his followers to continue the ministry he initiated on earth. I understand the Sunday morning Bible study, as was revealed during the dialogue at the 8:30 service, has been engaged in a lively discussion over the past several weeks about the Holy Spirit. How do we find words to explain the unexplainable, define that which is so difficult to define, something you know to be true but can not always articulate to someone else? Welcome to Trinity Sunday. Try explaining that there is one God, known to us in three ways. If you thought it was challenging to talk about the Holy Spirit, just try the Trinity. That should keep the Sunday morning bible study busy for a long time!

The doctrine of the Trinity was formed many centuries after the Biblical canon was established. Nowhere in the Bible do you find a doctrine of the Trinity. What we hear this morning in the Epistle and Gospel lessons is Trinitarian language, not a definition or teaching of the Trinity. Jesus commands his disciples to go out and make disciples and then to baptize them using a Trinitarian formula; in the name of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit. Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians contains a blessing that utilizes similar language: “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” In this case, the relationship that is named is as important as the language.

There is a famous 15th century icon of the Trinity by Andrei Rublev. I received a copy of this icon when I was installed at my second church. Three clergywomen gave it to me. It hangs on the wall behind my desk, but today I have placed it on the communion table to share with you. Come forward after the service to take a closer look. This icon tells the story of the visit of three strangers to Abraham and Sara, to announce the birth of a child. At the heart of the visit was a great banquet. The icon shows three figures placed around the table, with a cup of wine prepared for them. In the front there is an open space, a welcoming space, and a reminder of the divine hospitality.

The Trinity, God the three in one, is a mystery. We can try to find language to describe it, as we so often do with the mysteries of life. We can conjure up images to help us make sense of it. However, no matter what we do or how we try to name our experience of God the three in one, it is still a mystery. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “I do not know why we hold ourselves responsible for explaining things that cannot be explained. Perhaps the most faithful sermon on the Trinity is one that sniffs around the edges of the mystery, hunting for something closer to an experience than an understanding.” She asks, “What, for instance, is the sound of three hands clapping?”

There are some things we can never adequately explain. There are some things that God did not intend for us to fully understand. Someone once said faith ceases to be faith when it can be explained. There are times when God invites us to be present to the mystery and to resist the temptation to come up with an explanation. It has been said, “the most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all-true art and science. He to whom emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead; his eyes are closed.” Can you guess who said this? (answer: Albert Einstein)

Although we may not be able to find language that sufficiently explains the Trinity, we know we have experienced God as three in one, as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. We understand the God of creation. We know that God came to live among us to become our Savior. Many of us have experienced the work of the Holy Spirit, those moments when we know God has been present, even if we don’t know how to explain it, because as faithful people there can be no other explanation.

In the gospel story this morning of the great commission, Jesus commands his followers to go into the world to make disciples. The word for disciple comes from a word that means student. Jesus sends us into the world to share our faith and to invite others to take the journey themselves. We don’t tell them what to believe. We don’t dictate how they should feel. We invite them to become part of a community grounded in love. We go into the world to create community, to share in God’s radical and amazing hospitality, the kind of hospitality that holds the trinity together. To be a disciple is to be a life long learner, one who is eager to know more, one who is open to a life of endless revelation, one who trusts that standing in the mystery is as important as understanding and embodying the teachings of Jesus.

Rev. Dr. Robert Watson says this about the Trinity, “the formula does not save us. Love does. The power at the heart of the universe is love. God is love. Christ is the most complete form of love that ever walked the earth, and the Holy Spirit is Christ’s love among us after Easter. But the essence of the Trinity is love—relational community love. People should know us by our love, not our doctrine.” Love is at the very core of our faith. Those who do not love their neighbors or their enemies can not love God. We can not make disciples if we do not have love in our hearts. There is no place for division or hatred in the kingdom of God. One can not call oneself a Christian, a disciple of Christ, if you hate another person.

Love is the heart of this holy mystery we call the Trinity. The Trinity is a holy communion not only with God, but with God’s creation. At the heart of this holy mystery is a desire, a deep yearning, to be in love with our brothers and sisters, to create a community marked by a love unlike any other love. On Trinity Sunday instead of trying to pin God down, we need perhaps to reorient our focus. What we understand is that our God is a God who is all about relationships and these relationships are grounded in love. God is not satisfied to be one thing, one expression or one essence. God is not only the Creator, but also one who is willing to be among us in human form. Then God remains with us, dwells within us, guides our lives from the very core of our beings. Our God

seeks us out to be in relationship with us, by any means possible. Our God is persistent and creative and pervasive, permeating every aspect of our existence.

Instead of worrying about what we don't know, what we can't explain or figure out, what we can't categorize or label, we'd be better off worrying about what is clear to us. Each of us is called to make disciples in the name of God our creator and Jesus our Savior and the Holy Spirit, the one who will be with us always to the end of the age.

The Trinity is our most sacred model for community. We can not be disciples alone. It is a communal endeavor. Whatever we do, we do together in love. We may disagree. We may argue. We may feel sometimes like we did when we were children, running home with our ball when we get frustrated with each other. However, we don't stop loving each other. No matter how we feel or what we do, God promises to work in and through us despite our human frailties.

The United Church of Christ has issued a challenge to its churches. It urges us to begin a holy conversation on race. It is amazing that in the year 2008 we have not made more progress in wiping out the evil of racism. It seems as though we take two steps forward and three steps back and never get as far as we hope to get. We are just months away from perhaps electing the first African American or female president. However, gender and race continue to be unequal factors in our decision. There are some people who have admitted they would never vote for a woman or a black man for president. Perhaps you heard the ugly stories this week of the ways in which young campaign workers for Barack Obama have been treated while working in places like Indiana and Pennsylvania. Some people were so bold as to use the "n" word when declaring they would never vote for Barack Obama. I imagine some of these same people also profess to be followers of Jesus Christ. We live in the shadow of an historical moment yet, I fear it will be the shadow side of ourselves that will keep us from experiencing the grace that is possible. People of love will find a way to speak honestly and openly about race with each other. People of love will stand up to racism or sexism or homophobia and not allow it to destroy our communities. People of love will do these things because the spirit of truth and justice and goodness has been given to us so we may have the courage to speak and act.

Language can not divide a community if love is what brings us together. The Trinity models the kind of radical hospitality that God invites us to share with each other, where all are welcome to the fellowship and embraced by God's love. I can not control what you say or do. I can not insure that someone who calls themselves a Christian will not act in an inhuman way, making offensive racist comments, or excluding others from the fellowship because of their skin color or where they were born or their sexual orientation. My responsibility as a disciple of Jesus is to examine myself, to name and seek healing for the ways in which I fail to create a community of love. My responsibility and my covenant are to continue to learn and grow and act by the power of love. As we stand in awe of this holy mystery we call the Trinity may we make the same commitment to each other. May we be faithful in our discipleship, sharing the love of God we have come to

know, and trust that this power of love will be with us always, whatever we may do in the name of our mysterious, triune God. May it be so! Amen