

Trinity Sunday, Year A

June 11, 2017

Holy Spirit, Cumming

Happy Trinity Sunday!

If you are a member of the Episcopal Church or any similar type of church (like Lutheran or Roman Catholic), you have heard some variation of the joke, “No one wants to preach on the Trinity because it’s likely the preacher will say something heretical.” Or you might hear the associate or seminarian say, “The rector assigned me to preach today because no one wants to preach on Trinity Sunday.” Well, Mother Bonnie was smart with her summer vacation, so it fell to me to preach on the Trinity.

And jokes aside, I do not mind preaching on the Trinity. Whatever heresy I commit, I trust the goodness of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to forgive me (and I hope you will, too). This doctrine, this framework, of how Catholic Christians understand the revelation of God is important and still relevant for our lives of faith today. So let’s stretch our minds and open our hearts together for the next few minutes.

A colleague of mine is beginning as the new rector of a congregation today and she is mindful that her first sermon would be on this... challenging preaching Sunday. So she did something very current—she put out a post on Facebook that said, “The Trinity is...” and then invited people to respond. And she got dozens and dozens of responses that ran the gamut.

One priest said, “That’s it—‘the Trinity is.’ No further answer is needed.” Others said more traditional answers like “The Trinity is mystery” or “The Trinity is perfection.” One person said, “It’s made up.” Another said, “Confusing.” If I asked you to fill in the blank, “The Trinity is...” what would you say?

For me, I gave two answers because I was thinking about my sermon. They are two answers that I carry with me as part of my faith in the Trinity. One is that our belief in the Trinity informs us that the heart of God is revealed in relationship. We believe in one God; yet the three persons within the Godhead that we commonly call “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” reveal that God connects and relates within God’s self. God is not a solitary, distant being. More about that in a moment.

My other answer was the fancy, seminary word, “perichoresis.” Has anyone heard that term before? It is a Greek word that means to move around something. Some scholars describe this as “the dance of God.” Described in this way, we believe that God exists in an eternal, loving movement that acknowledges, inspires, and embraces God’s self in relationship. It is still a mystery, but gives us an image for what God is like in relationship. If you have seen the movie, “The Shack,” there is a scene in which the Father and the Spirit are dancing together. I think the author of the book knew that word.

So this theological talk is helpful in a way. But we can get stuck in our heads and let it remain theoretical. Our faith in Jesus never lets us stay just in our heads. Through the power of the Spirit, we are inspired to live the way the Trinity does—in a full and dynamic relationship with God and with each other. Believing in God as Trinity is our reminder and inspiration and the goal of what we are called to be as a community of faith.

In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, he makes this connection between Trinitarian theology and church life. He is writing to a community that has proven to be a challenge for him as its founding pastor. They are very affluent and very gifted and live in a very cosmopolitan city. As one might expect of a church with those characteristics, they can be very full of themselves. In his two letters to them, Paul is dealing with a range of issues from spiritual pride to moral failure to mistreatment of the poorer members by the wealthier members. Issues not unlike many churches in our world today.

Despite the challenge of this congregation, you can tell that Paul really loves them. That is the key for any good pastor—no matter how gifted and charismatic a pastor may be, if he or she does not love the members of the congregation, the pastor is failing them. So due to his love of these people, Paul shoots straight with them. He lets them know when they are too full of themselves or mistreating people or being immoral. Paul is a good pastor.

And in the passage we heard read this morning, he talks about what he wants for them in their relationships with one another. And he talks about it in the context of one of the few Trinitarian blessings we have in the New Testament. Listen to Paul's admonition to them—

“Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.”

Do you hear all of the relationship words that he lists as a farewell reminder to this challenging congregation? **Rejoice**—bring the gift of a cheerful heart to your daily lives and interactions with one another. Don't be a grouch. **Learn to get along with each other**—you do not have to get your way all the time. And greet one another with a holy kiss—with **deep and real affection from the heart**. When we live like that, the God we worship as Trinity, the God we believe is revealed in relationship, will be with us and bless us.

These are words I think most of us would acknowledge as true; but we also realize these words can be difficult to live. There are usually some stumbling blocks. One of the most common issues that trip up relationships is the issue of power. Who is in charge? Who gets their way and why? And this is where our understanding of God as Trinity can be so helpful.

You see, as the church discerned and articulated the idea of the Trinity over its first three hundred years, it came up with some surprising insights. As the church came to believe in the Trinity-- that the one God believed in by Jews is one being and three persons-- that raised

some profound questions about the nature of God. Specifically, are the three persons equal in power and dignity and eternity? The church came to believe that each person of the Trinity is co-equal, co-powerful, and co-eternal. There is not a hierarchy within God.

That understanding of God as Trinity again has implications for us and our issues with power that can get in the way of our relationships. Unlike the human limitations of the metaphors of Father and Son, the first and second person of the Godhead are equal in power, eternity, and dignity. Each person of the Trinity acknowledges and defers to each other in mutual love and an eternal dance of grace. This is where we may get confused-- the human Jesus was submissive to God, but the eternal Son is fully equal to the Father.

So the power and authority demonstrated within God is expressed for the good of the whole and for the good of creation. There is not a power struggle within the Trinity. It is like a perfect dance in which each person anticipates the movement of the other and moves in response and in order to initiate the next move. This exists in ways beyond our understanding but we can catch imperfect glimpses through images in our sacred imagination.

So what does this mean for us? Our relationships should mirror those aspects of the Trinity. Some of us have power and authority, but we believe it exists for the good of the whole. Management books and philosophers use the term “servant leadership” to describe this. So whether pope or president or potentate, good leaders know the power they exercise is not about them—it is about the people they serve and love. We get that concept of power from the heart of the Trinity and we see it exemplified in human form in Jesus.

As we relate to one another, competing for power is not the Trinity way. Remember the ancient hymn of the church which Paul quoted to describe how God the Son became human. Paul wrote, “Christ, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be *grasped*, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant...” (Philippians 2:6-7a). We who follow Christ have that calling and the grace from God to live that way—with joy, doing the hard work of relationships (like forgiveness and courtesy) and always with the holy affection that comes from our Lord. What a great calling we share together!

So this Trinity Sunday, let us remember that the life of God is available to us as *our* life. It is living and dynamic and exciting and at times even scary. Think of the best relationship we have ever experienced-- and that and more has been made available by grace to each of us and all of us together. The good news is that when we live that way, people will notice and be drawn to what we believe. And though we may not be able to explain the Trinity very well, we can live it by grace in a way that gives glory to God and enables us to love one another. Amen.