

June 15, 2014

Trinity Sunday, Year A

Happy Trinity Sunday!

This is an unusual day in the church's year because today we remember a dogma of the church. Typically we remember an event from the life of Christ or of the church—Christmas, Easter, or Pentecost, like last Sunday. Those events help us to remember God's saving acts in history and rejoice and have peace in believing God is in us and with us.

This day is different. At one level, it is about theology. We are remembering something unique to our Christian faith. When I lead an Inquirers' class, I am always sure to review the teaching of the church about the Trinity. Along with the Incarnation-- our belief that God became human in Jesus-- the church's belief in God as Trinity are defining beliefs of the Christian faith.

Since Trinity Sunday is about theology, some of us might glaze over at this point. Not many of us want to get into the technical and academic aspects of the doctrine of the Trinity. But I believe most of us have curiosity and questions about what it means to say that God is Trinity. Now there have been books written by people like St. Augustine to answer that question. There was an entire course at my seminary on that one topic. So it is not a subject easily translated into a fifteen minute sermon. But let me try to raise the central points that leave us with some questions and implications.

The Trinity is hard to understand. Because of that, I think it lets us know that the church is on to something about the nature of God. If our understanding of God is too simple, or simplistic, it is likely lacking in some way. The church's belief in the Trinity actually developed over centuries and was not formalized until the Council of Nicaea in the fourth c. Even after that, parts of the church continued to debate if the understanding we recite in the Nicene Creed every Sunday is accurate.

The church developed this belief based on two main things—first, relatively few Scriptures in which the names, "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" are used together, verses like we heard today from II Corinthians and Matthew; and second, the church's experience recorded in Scripture and after the years in which the New Testament was written, in which the church experienced God as three persons—God Almighty—totally other and worshiped and adored; God made human in Jesus; and God moving in creation and among us in ways we can feel and experience. The church knew God in those ways and so wrote about that experience in its theology and expressed it in its prayers, hymns, and liturgy.

So what was the church to do with those experiences as an expression of our faith? What happened in our history developed over centuries with debates and conversations, reflection and prayer, writing and responses, and more experiences of the Triune God, until the church of the fourth century landed on the expression of faith we find in the Nicene Creed and more fully (if more awkwardly) in the Athanasian Creed (check your BCP, page 8--).

The church's experience and our language try to get at three aspects of God:

- God is all powerful, the Creator, the one in whom we live and move and have our being. God is beyond what we can ever fully understand or express with the limits of human intellect, language, and art. But that all powerful God reveals God's essence to us in ways we can grasp.
- God's essence includes relationship—before the human Jesus lived on earth 2000 years ago, there was God the Father and God the Son, eternally in relationship and yet one. There are not two gods according to our faith, but the one God Almighty can be described as dynamic and eternal relationship or community of being. The nature of that relationship is a mystery; but it is a clue for how we express our faith in worship of God and in our common life and ministry.
- God's essence includes movement, creativity, and action. God creates. God connects and makes covenant relationships. God cares and loves. God is not simply a distant figure with all power but no heart. God loves us like a mother loves her child. That movement and creativity and love is what we understand as the Holy Spirit—not a separate God, but God in relationship. The Spirit connects Father and Son in eternal relationship within the one God. And the Spirit spills over, so to speak, as God expresses God's love in creation—in each one of us and in the cosmos and in things we don't even know about yet. The Spirit is scary and wonderful and comforting and challenging and on and on.

Now whenever you speak about the Trinity, there is a danger of committing heresy because it is so hard to use human language to describe the divine. As an aside, that is why rectors usually assign the preaching on Trinity Sunday to an assistant or seminarian (Cathy is out of town on a mission trip and I decided to give Br. Kenneth a break this year). But those three points are good working statements to begin or carry on a conversation about the Trinity.

Now in the way I normally preach, I ask a question or bring the sermon around to "So what does this mean for us and our day to day lives?" Can we bring the high theology of the Trinity to how we live—you know, how we do things, like go to the store, hang out at the neighborhood pool, attend a cocktail party, work at our job, and of course live, serve, and worship within this community of faith. Well, I hope so. Let me give some ideas on how believing in the Trinity can inspire and guide us.

First, because we believe in the Trinity, we know that God is mystery. He is not an old man with a white beard sitting on a cloud-throne; or a sphere of pure light floating in space; or however we might imagine God. God is more than that, beyond that. The church has given us words in the Creed; but the church has also made clear that our words are inadequate. So however we imagine God, let us hold it lightly and worship the God beyond our images of God.

Second, because we believe in the Trinity, we know that at God's heart is relationship. God loves within God. That is God's essence. So as it has been said by someone, we become what we worship. What is of ultimate importance because of our faith in the Trinity is that we maintain loving relationships with people around us—family, fellow parishioners, neighbors, strangers, enemies, people with much more and much less stuff than us. Relationship is primary. So when we are not sure what to do in our lives, let us ask for grace to go deeper into a more full relationship with the people around us.

We can all build relationships in simple every day ways—ask a question of another and really listen, not judging or interrupting or planning what you are going to say next. Be kind to someone without expecting anything in return. Look especially for people who might need a kindness—a smile, some support, a shared meal, or a small gift that lets the other person know you care. Take the extra step to reach out and understand and care especially when you are tempted to lash out or walk away from someone in your life. Relationship is primary.

Third, know God is among us right now. God is constantly sustaining life or the whole universe would cease to exist. And if that's true, we need to be open to God's presence and be guided by God's Spirit. We can do simple things like coming to church on Sunday or participating in a small group during the week. That way we can practice with others connecting with God. You see, it does take practice and doing it with others helps us to learn best practices so to speak. We can pray—at set times when we are intentional and use the prayers of the church; and also pray moment by moment, breathing prayers like, "Come Holy Spirit" so that our life is a living sacrifice, filled with God's grace.

Today I invite us all to think and talk about how we understand God and then pray and act on our belief in real and tangible ways. What we believe matters—not so we will be right or pass an exam to go to heaven; but so that what we believe, informed by the ancient wisdom of the church and the revelation of God and the presence of the Holy Spirit can shape who we are so that we express God's life more and more in our lives.

Amen.