

Sermon 060715 Trinity Sunday  
Scripture Genesis 1: 1- 2:4, John 1: 1-14  
Sermon Title E Pluribus Unum

I did something recently that has left my fellow clergy shaking their heads. I had wanted to give the sermon that I gave two weeks ago about my visit to Arlington National Cemetery for over a year. I decided to give it on Memorial Day weekend, which was appropriate. Then I realized that Memorial Day weekend this year fell on Pentecost. So I moved Pentecost back a week.

I cleared it with the Deacons who thought no one would notice. Actually, someone did notice, but this gave me a real sense of power. By moving Pentecost back it week, it also meant moving Trinity Sunday back a week. The rest of Christianity celebrated Trinity Sunday last week. We are celebrating Trinity Sunday today.

Moving Christian holidays around got complicated very quickly. It was fun while it lasted but I'll try to avoid it going forward.

The notion of the Trinity is a theological concept that has been held as Christian doctrine since the fourth century. The word 'trinity' does not appear in the Bible, but the foundations of the concept are in Scripture. The idea, simply stated, is that there is one God, but that God has three parts, or persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. People who like to take gender out of

God sometimes call the three persons the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Comforter.

I may have been trying to be too clever in titling this sermon ‘E Pluribus Unum.’ That is a Latin phrase that appears on the United States dollar bill and the Seal of the United States. It means, ‘out of many, one,’ meaning one nation made up of many states. I think of the Trinity like that. The doctrine of the trinity is not about ‘threeness,’ it is about ‘oneness.’ It is more important that we are one nation as Americans, than our separate state identities. It is more important that there is one God than the nature or the complexity of God.

The doctrine of the Trinity is a theological attempt to understand the not- understandable. It attempts to explain the unexplainable. My theology professor in seminary, The Rev. Dr. Wesley Wildman, says that the world’s greatest theologians do not fully understand the Trinity, and the best of them know that. That does not mean, however, that the concept is not helpful to believers in thinking about God and the nature of God.

There is a way to approach this three in one idea that might be helpful. Think of yourself as one person. Now think of yourself as components... body, mind, and spirit.

Now, there are some people of faith, many theologians among them, who will quickly establish whether or not they

believe in the Trinity. They will say, “I am a Trinitarian.” or “ I am not a Trinitarian.” It is drawing discussion boundary lines. It might be like saying that I am a NE Patriots fan to a NY Jets fan. It tells both parties where the conversation is going before it even begins. I want you to know that I am a Trinitarian, but that does not mean that you have to be. This is a church in which you can find your own path of faith and my role is to walk with you on that path.

You can be a good Christian without believing in the Trinity. One of the greatest Christian theologians of the twentieth century was Paul Tillich, whom I often quote from this pulpit. His notion of God as ‘the ground of all being’ is decidedly not Trinitarian, but I have found Tillich and that concept enormously helpful in my theological thinking.

As we look at this concept of the Trinity let us keep the oneness of God, the unity of God forward in our thinking. We are monotheists. We believe in one God. The nature of God we can only wonder at, but let us consider this concept of a God with three major contributors or roles.

We look at phenomena in the world and attempt to explain it. We see the wonder of the world, the universe, and we think that it just didn’t happen. Somehow something even more awesome must have created all this and we think, “God.”

We learn of this human who walked the earth 2000 years ago who had powers to heal people and do acts that no other human could do. This person taught people how to treat each other with love, compassion, and forgiveness. He went on to be tortured and killed for his actions and after three days he rose from the dead so to show that death is not the end of us. We look at the Jesus Christ story and we think, “God.”

We feel that we have spiritual lives beyond the physical lives that we live. We sense that our spiritual life is connected to a larger spiritual presence that exists beyond ourselves. It connects us to others and the world and moves in mysterious ways and we think, “God.” We see manifestations of God in the world and in our lives and the three persons of the Trinity help us grasp them.

I mentioned that the root of the doctrine of the Trinity is in scripture. Let’s look at a few places. In our Hebrew Bible lesson this morning from the book of Genesis, creation is in it’s earliest moments. Even before God starts speaking creation by saying, “Let there be light” our text says in verse two, “The Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” So in the beginning there was God and the Spirit of God.

If we look at our gospel lesson from the beginning of John’s Gospel, we see that gospel starting with the same three words, “In the beginning.” So that is bringing us back to the creation in

Genesis. John's text states, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." In the Ancient Greek that the gospel was written in, the word for 'word' is 'logos.' The word 'logos' in the Ancient Greek means much more than the word 'word' means today. It means not only the definition of the word, but the thought to speak it, the breath used to speak, the sound, the definition, and the results from saying the word. The Logos has a dynamic role in John's creation story.

Then, we jump ahead 14 verses in the chapter to find the statement, "The Word became flesh." That flesh is Jesus Christ. John is saying that Christ existed before Bethlehem. That the Logos from which God spoke creation was Christ as part of God. There you have the three persons, God the creator, the Spirit of God hovering over the waters, and Christ participating in creation. There are other parts of scripture that point toward the concept of the Trinity, but none as wondrous. If you find all this hard to grasp, hard to conceive of, well... welcome to the club.

We said that the doctrine of the Trinity is an attempt to explain the unexplainable. The purpose is not to break God down to a size small enough for us to digest, but to raise us up, feed our imaginations at the awesomeness of God. When we think of God, we should be stretched.

There is a theological concept that was advanced most brilliantly, I believe, by St. Thomas Aquinas. It is called ‘apaphatic theology.’ It is about how there are things that are impossible to know about God. Much of God remains hidden to us. That is part of what makes God God.

Now I’m a pastor. I’m not a theologian, and I’m not a Trinity expert, but I do not believe the doctrine states that the three persons of the Trinity tell the whole story of God. Think of it like this, God is one, and we know of three aspects. We can only wonder at what else there might be of our awesome God. The doctrine tries to show the big picture but does not pretend to paint a complete picture.

We, as the church, cling to the notion of the Trinity. We live in an age of preference for tidy thoughts and concise answers. The church is not willing to go there. God is too glorious, too vast to simply explain away.

The church baptizes its faithful in the name of the Trinity. The church blesses the living and the dead in the name of the Trinity. The Trinity gives form and structure to Christian worship and thought.

The concept satisfies our need to stimulate our imaginations, it informs and enlivens our worship, and it stimulates our debates

and thoughts of God. It gives us words, language, and concepts that enable us to think on divine matters.

The Trinity allows us to imagine, experience, anticipate, and celebrate the wholeness and unity of God. It is our faithful optimism in the face of worldly pessimism.

When we think about God, we get closer to God. The closer we get to God, the more humble we become. The more humble we become the more devotional we become. The more devotional we become the more we realized how blessed by God we really are.

Will you pray with me?

*Almighty God, we praise your awesome wonder. We give thanks for your glorious creation. We give thanks for your Son Jesus Christ, in whom we are saved. We give thanks for the movement of the Holy Spirit in this world and in our lives. We ask your continued blessings upon us in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN*