

GOD TALK

Sermon for Pentecost 1C (Trinity)

LPC, 5/26/13

I have an idea: Let's talk about God.

How do you describe God?

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth and all that is in them, including people. When people finally had the time, they looked around and saw beauty and terrible power in the natural world around them. They couldn't possibly understand it all, never mind control it, so they called it God.

God made the world, and the world is good. It was "natural", perhaps, that people would see God in nature. But though nature reflects God's beauty and power, nature is not God. God saw that people had made nature into their god, and were worshiping the creation as creator.

So God revealed more of Godself to people, and became known to them in covenant and law. God made covenant with the people, and God gave them law, and both law and covenant were good.

But though covenant and law reflect both God's nearness and God's authority, covenant and law are not God. God saw that people were making the law into their god, and were worshiping the creation as creator.

So God revealed more of Godself to people, this time in the form of God's own Son. The Son had been with God and had been God from the very beginning. Through the power of God's Spirit, which had also been with God and had been God from the very beginning, the Son was born as a human being on earth, remaining fully God while being fully human. As the human being Jesus Christ, God lived and died, was resurrected and ascended back to be with God for ever, in the unity of God's Spirit.

Therefore as Christians we say that God is Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit; one God in three persons. Clear as mud, right?

This theology sure wasn't clear for the first five hundred years of Christianity. You might have thought that this (Bible) would be enough to settle the matter but it wasn't. So people created the statement of faith you can find on page 96 (53) of your Prayer Book. This is one of the church's earliest documents. The Apostles' Creed made clear, once and for all, what Christians believe about God. Not.

The Apostles' Creed is good, but people still fell into conflict. For some it simply made sense that if Jesus was God's Son, he came after God. Maybe soon after, but certainly after, in the manner of sons following fathers.

The early church argued about this, came out on the side of coeternity, and created the documents you can find on page 358 (327) of your Prayer Book. Finally, the Nicene Creed made everything clear. The Son is eternally begotten, of one Being with the Father. No one can argue with that, right? Wrong.

The Nicene Creed is good, but people fell into conflict again. For some it simply made sense that Jesus could not possibly be both fully human and fully divine. (I can't imagine why not!) so the Council of Chalcedon came out with the statement you see at the top of the page. And that was good.

Still people for some reason struggled with the idea that something could be three and one at the same time, so the Creed of St. Athanasius, the document at the bottom of the page, was created. This was the end of all controversy in the church for ever about the nature of God.

Obviously, I facete (is that a word?) The idea of Trinity is just so difficult. Part of Mohammed's appeal to Islamic converts must certainly have been that they could drop the idea of God being Trinity. Even groups who remain nominally Christian, like many Unitarians and Mormons, deep-six Trinitarian doctrine.

Not that people haven't tried to make Trinity easier to understand. The diagram on the front of (in) your bulletin is one such attempt.

St. Augustine's description is that the Triune God is love, all love, all one thing. Love requires a lover, a beloved and the love that unites them. The Father is the lover, the Son the beloved, and the Spirit the love that unites them.

Let me try again: imagine this bowl is full of love. There is so much love in this bowl that it overflows. The love in the bowl is the Father, the love outside the bowl is the Son, but obviously the same substance as what's inside the bowl, and the Spirit is what makes the love inside the bowl and the love outside the bowl not only the same thing, but accessible to humans.

The problem with all these models is that, like nature, Scripture, the law, and the creeds, all these illustrations are good but not God. Take any one of them to its logical extension and you're in trouble.

Only God is God. We try to understand, but we cannot. If God could be understood, God would not be God.

God is known in relationship. This is why we describe God Godself as relationship of three. When you think about it, this is sort of the way we know other people. Even people who know each other for years often find there's something they don't know, or understand, about each other. That doesn't stop them from loving each other. And that, I think, is the point. We know God only in loving God, and being loved.