

THE TRINITY SERMON

Sermon for Trinity – Gen 1:1-2:4a, 2Cor 13:11-13, Mt 28:16-20

LPC, 6/15/14

Happy Trinity Sunday!

The Trinity, as I hope you know, is the theological concept that God, while remaining a single entity, exists in three “persons,” whom we call Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Trinity is foundational to the Christian faith.

Once a year, on Trinity Sunday, which is always the Sunday after Pentecost, preachers dust off their old textbooks and class notes and try to explain the Trinity to our congregations. Rectors who have assistants or seminarians are famous for foisting the Trinity Sunday sermon off on their subordinates. One imagines them wiping their brows and saying, “Phew! Thank God I don’t have to do that!”

The Trinity is an admittedly difficult concept. What it actually means has been minutely analyzed over millennia. For myself, I am not sure the Trinity can be adequately explained systematically, but only by analogy, story and poetry. Many analogies however are flawed. For example the one likening God to the three states of water: liquid water, ice and steam, is imperfect because, unlike water, God exists in all three persons simultaneously regardless of outside conditions.

One Trinitarian formulation that was popular a decade or two ago, especially amongst people seeking non-sexist language to describe God, was “Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier.” This too is problematic because it reduces God to a job description or flow chart, as if each member of the Trinity has a separate job to do. One can imagine the God-the-Redeemer at God-Corporate getting a request and saying, “This isn’t really a Redemption job, send it down to Sanctification.”

One of the better analogies is offered by theologians Jeremy Begbie, who likens the Trinity to a chord, all three notes of which must sound to create the chord.

The way my favorite Systematics professor described the Trinity is that God the Father pours himself out in love for the Son, who reflects and returns this love in equal measure, resulting in an overflow of love which is the Holy Spirit. This description owes a lot to St. Augustine, who described the Trinity as Lover, Beloved, and the Love that unites them.

A modern story about the Trinity that captured the imagination of many people is the bestseller *The Shack*, by William P. Young, which came out a few years ago. In this book the main character encounters all three members of the Trinity in human form: not only Jesus Christ, but God the Father as a jolly, fat, African-American woman, and the Holy Spirit as an ethereal Asian lady. I always appreciate creative ways of thinking about God, but this characterization creates some friction in my own mind with the doctrine of the Incarnation, for reasons that are probably too technical to go into right now.

When all else fails, we can always turn to today's Bible readings, can't we? The reading from Genesis reminds us that God is preexistent and created everything. The Gospel of Matthew demonstrates that Jesus himself used the Trinitarian formula, and the Letter to the Corinthians shows us that even the earliest Christians understood God as Trinity. Interestingly, in Paul's benediction, love is associated with God, grace with Jesus Christ and communion with the Holy Spirit.

I doubt that Paul intends these attributes to be exclusive. In other words, I don't think he means that, within the Trinity, love is the Father's prerogative, God the Son has dibs on grace, and the Holy Spirit holds the rights to communion. Surely the entire Trinity exercises love, grace and communion. You can't divide the functions of God.

Paul is actually describing, in rather beautiful terms, how people experience the Trinity. In love we recognize the God of creation. We know Christ when we experience grace, and we recognize the Holy Spirit when we experience communion with each other and with God. But the persons of the Trinity are not turf-conscious. As one of my mentors was fond of saying, "All of God does everything." To return to the music analogy, in listening to a symphony you can recognize the melody in the violins, the color in the woodwinds and the rhythm in the bass without needing to parse out which part creates the music.

Most Christians deal with the ambiguity of Trinitarian doctrine by just not thinking about it: "God's in heaven, Jesus is my friend, and I'll let somebody else worry about the Holy Spirit."

The prevalence of this attitude, even at an institutional level, was demonstrated for me while I was in seminary (the first time.) A couple of my classmates as part of a project reviewed the mission statements of hundreds of Episcopal parishes online. Most mentioned "Jesus" or "Christ," some cited "God." But not a one mentioned the Holy Spirit. Spirit is the part of the Trinity that people find most elusive.

For those who aren't sure about the Holy Spirit, I would ask, how do you experience God? Do you recognize God in the beauty of creation or great works of art, in your memories of early religious training at your grandma's knee, or in reading the Bible, in the sacraments, or in the love of family and friends?

The Holy Spirit is what makes all of that possible. The Holy Spirit enables God to be known. The Holy Spirit is what has transmitted the story of Christ throughout the many generations since Jesus actually walked the earth. To understand the Holy Spirit, I invite you to read the stanzas of the last hymn which we skipped in the interests of brevity. All that is described in stanzas 2-5 of Hymn 370 is the action of the Holy Spirit.

In our next hymn, the last for today, we will sing, "Immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible, hid from our eyes." God in God's magnificence may be hid from our eyes, but never from our hearts, thanks be to God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Thanks be to the Trinity.