

## Sermon for May 22, 2016 – “One, Yet Three”

Trinity Sunday Year C – Texts: Deuteronomy 6:1-9; Matthew 28:16-20

A young minister was so nervous giving his first sermon that he could hardly speak. In the week that followed, he asked his bishop: “How can I relax?” The wise and experienced bishop said, “Well, it might help if you put a vodka in your glass instead of water. After a few sips, everything should go smoothly.” Sunday came and the minister did as his bishop suggested. As a result, he thought that everything went very well. After the sermon, the young man asked the bishop how he’d done. The monsignor replied, “Just fine, except you should remember the following before addressing the congregation again:

- Next time, sip the vodka rather than gulping it down.
- There are 10 Commandments, not 12.
- There are 12 disciples, not 10.
- We don’t refer to the Cross as the “Big T.”
- We don’t refer to Jesus and his disciples as “J.C. and the boys.”
- And we refer to the Holy Trinity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit... not “Big Daddy, Junior, and the Spook.”

Today is Trinity Sunday, the first Sunday after Pentecost. It’s a time of year that the church, for quite some time now, has believed to be useful, to remind the faithful that God is a mystery which is best understood in three ways:

As creator – or father.

As redeemer – or son.

And as sustainer – or spirit.

In this we affirm that God is One...yet three.

Some of you might have read a book that was very popular a few years ago: “The Shack” by William P. Young. The book tackles the question, “Where is God in a world so filled with unspeakable pain?” It does so by using allegorical images of the Trinity. Allegory, using images to convey ideas, is a notoriously tricky literary device. Many attempt it, few succeed. John Bunyan’s book “The Pilgrim’s Progress” which was published in 1678 is an unqualified success, but Young is more ambitious. Each person of the Trinity becomes a character in The Shack. The Father is Papa, a deliberately peculiar name for an African American woman. Jesus, naturally, is a Middle Eastern man. And the Holy Spirit is an Asian woman named Sarayu, which is a Sanskrit (a classical Indian language) word that means “air, or wind – that which is streaming.” Bunyan and Young aren’t the only ones to do something like this. Christian history is littered with theologians who experimented with new conceptions of the Trinity. Some were labeled heretics. To be fair, however, the Bible doesn’t provide the full-blown “Trinitarian doctrine” per se. There are pieces of it strewn throughout scripture from Genesis to Revelation and it took a succession of church councils several hundred years to finally put it together and articulate it. But, we Christians today generally don’t share the early church’s enthusiasm for Greek metaphysics. We show little patience for complicated theology or theology that can’t be expressed by a single proof text. We really don’t mind theology, so long as its application is obvious and immediate. And so most discussions of the Trinity end with: “So what?” Even so, the doctrine is Christianity’s unique description of God. It won’t hurt us to explore something that’s lasted almost 1,700 years.

So, what is the doctrine of the Trinity? Simply stated it's that God exists as three persons – but is one God. Meaning that God the Son and God the Holy Spirit have exactly the same nature or being as God the Father in every way. It's as we heard both in the call to worship and in our first reading: **“Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is one.”** But more than simply something we believe it's something that helps bring us a little closer to comprehending the incomprehensible. It's a way of bringing God closer, making God more personal. By that I mean that God's not an idol, some impersonal “force,” or harsh and distant Judge, but a living, personal Heavenly Father. A God that shows his personal love and concern for us, a God who is not indifferent to our actions. A God who cares and who listens, a God who seeks relationship with his children. Thus, we've come to understand that: God is here – and everywhere. God is mighty – and tender. God is just – yet merciful. God is spirit – and takes on human flesh. God is in Christ – and Christ is in us. God is Spirit and blows where it wills – yet abides in our hearts. God is one – yet three.

Early in his letter to the Romans, Paul wrote this about God: **“Since the creation of the world His eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things He has made.”** When you go outside after this worship time or any time, take a little bit more time to worship. Take a look around at the trees, the grass. Take a look at the sky. Look into the faces of your spouse, your children, your grandchildren. Listen for the rustle of leaves in the trees, the singing of a bird, and give thanks. Give thanks to the power, the grace, the beauty that made it all. You know and understand what I'm saying, that's why you're here. You're here because God is. Because God is good. All the time. You want to remind yourselves of that, you want to share that truth and celebrate it before God. But there are many others who stop right there. They want to stop with the clouds and the trees, with the land and the sea and the creatures that inhabit them because, while they get a spiritual message from them, they don't get the same message of goodness and beauty that we do. We who know that God reveals Himself in many ways...A God who is One, yet three.

Last Sunday was Pentecost. It was a celebration of the Spirit of God, the Spirit which is God. We celebrated the incredible goodness of God. That God should come to us, move through us and dwell within us. We celebrated that God would empower us and give us gifts by which we might do his will, gifts by which we might communicate with him and by which we might communicate him to others.

Many people have thought of the incredible power of God, fewer have thought about God as a spirit that inhabits us as a force within that can be touched and which can touch us. The Spirit of God, God the Spirit, is the one which guides us, comforts us, convicts us and conveys God's mercy to us. It's working in us whether or not we realize or acknowledge it. It's the one who listens, the one who speaks but who never asks of us that which is wrong, and never does anything through us that would bring shame to the name of God. It's by the Spirit that our prayer is prayer to God. It's by the Spirit that our prayer is answered. God is one...yet three.

I think it's safe to say that God is a mystery. A mystery so big, so awesome, and so holy that our limited minds can never grasp the wholeness of it. Yet, God has placed in us a capacity to appreciate the mystery that God is and to embrace that mystery. What's more, God has revealed himself in the act of creation and in the manifest goodness and beauty of nature as well as through Scripture. But most importantly, God has revealed himself in the one named Jesus, called Christ, born of the Spirit. The One who did everything through the Spirit.

The One who healed and forgave by the Spirit and who spoke the word of God by the Spirit. In Christ, God reveals himself as the One who loves and who does so in tangible, concrete, personal ways. Jesus is the One who reveals the way to us, the One who speaks the truth to us, the one who gives life by His touch and by His word. God is One...yet three.

It seems to me that we have in the Trinity something very precious. We have the good news of the salvation for all people. We have the message concerning God's love and his desire to grant peace and wholeness to all his children. We have a light that shines into the darkness of human hearts and brings healing, a light that shines forth from there into the lives of those around us. It's seemed good to numerous generations of our spiritual ancestors to remember this truth on this particular day in a particular and special way, and so we do today.

Talk of the Holy Trinity is often dismissed even by Christian believers as a lot of theory. As if it were of interest only to theologians and of no practical significance in the lives of ordinary people. Maybe so. I happen to believe it's of enormous practical importance to us. Why? Well, I think that it's because what we **say** about God reflects what we **believe** about God, and what we believe about God finds its way into our lives. What we believe about God makes a difference in the way we live. It makes a difference whether or not we believe in a personal God, whether we believe that God is aloof and remote, or whether God cares and acts in our world. It makes a difference – a big difference!

We believe that God cares about the world, that God so loved the world, that God did something very special. We believe that God sent his Son to us to form a new and lasting relationship with us. And, we believe that God comes to us personally in the Holy Spirit. But, if we believe this about God, then God is certainly not remote and uncaring but close and active. It's here, speaking of God in terms of relationships, that the notion of the Trinity comes most fully alive to us. One theologian writes "We do not hold the doctrine of the Trinity because it is self-evident or [logical]... "We hold it because God has revealed that this is what He is like." This should be enough to answer our "So what?" question.

We care about the Trinity because this is how God has shown Himself to us in the Bible...even if we have to put the puzzle pieces together ourselves. And so we should also carefully study the Trinity in order to learn from this dynamic relationship.

The Trinity reminds us that God didn't create us because he was lonely or bored. It reminds us that God is love and that's what loves does – create..And in love, God even draws believers into fellowship with himself through the work of Christ and the agency of the Holy Spirit. The Trinity is no mere abstraction. It's God's plan of salvation in action. God the Father – desiring to restore the relationship between himself and us – sent his incarnate Son, who willingly gave his life. After defeating evil by raising his Son from the dead, God sent his Holy Spirit as the seal of salvation for all who believe. So what? Well, nothing less than relationship with God. Pretty high stakes if you ask me! So, grab hold of the mystery – embrace it. But not just the mystery that God is One, yet Three, But the mystery that God loves you, the mystery that God cares for you; the mystery that God can and will use you to do great things...The mystery that God can and will use you to bring healing, and wholeness, and hope. Maybe that's the greater mystery.

How – we ask – can God care for me? Look at me – at the things I've done.

Or, how can God possibly use me? Look at the state I'm in – what possible use can I be to God? What gifts do I have? Maybe we're the greater mystery, maybe we're greater mysteries to ourselves than God is. Maybe all we can do is continue to trust God. Maybe all we can do is be open to accepting the gift of the Father's grace and allowing ourselves to be transformed by it. Maybe all we can do is be open to surrendering ourselves to Christ and responding to His call to mission and ministry. His Great Commission to "go...and make disciples of all nations...in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Maybe all we can do is be open to the leading of the Spirit and being empowered for that work. Maybe all we can do is to appreciate and embrace the mystery that is God – one, yet three.

Thanks be to God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen and amen.