

Sermon May 26 2024 Trinity Sunday

Every year when Trinity Sunday comes around, preachers face the daunting task of addressing the idea of the Trinity. If a preacher has an assistant or a seminarian, they usually punt the responsibility for the sermon to them.

Why?

Because it's complicated, and we preachers like to bring clarity and grace to any topic. The Trinity doesn't lend itself to clarity.

Yes, I know there are all sorts of little metaphors as St Patrick is said to have done with the three-leafed clover, or the various ways the word "love" can be parsed as St Augustine told us, or the dance of the three persons of God sometimes called 'perichoresis,' a Greek word for the three persons of God dancing around in a circle holding hands.

So perhaps it would be helpful to have a little history lesson about the doctrine of the Trinity.

This doctrine is something that began to be formed in the early church, in the first few centuries after Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. It evolved from a close reading of all the Scripture around the nature of God and the nature of Jesus. It was also deeply influenced by the words of those who knew and experienced Jesus in real life. These were people who encountered the living Jesus, who spoke of God as "one with him" and as "my heavenly Father." In other words, intimately present and also out there somewhere. Similarly, the early disciples experienced what Jesus spoke of as the Spirit as a guiding presence who was both distinct from him and from Heavenly Father God, and

yet somehow intimately connected to them both. And so the church sought to name this phenomenon, this “one-ness” and “three-ness” of God, and thus we have the Trinity.

Clear as mud, I know. Sometimes our human words fall woefully short when it comes to explaining theological concepts.

But perhaps this Gospel today is helpful, because it is, at its heart, about relationship with God, and all our words and metaphors and imagery around the Trinity are all about our relationship with God.

This passage is early in John’s Gospel. Nicodemus, an important person in the political and spiritual life of his community, comes to Jesus. He comes at night, when no one can see him visiting this unconventional rabbi who makes the other religious leaders nervous. Remember that this passage immediately follows Jesus going to the temple and overturning tables to banish worldly commerce out of a holy place. Jesus is not really popular among the religious leaders at this moment.

Nicodemus is smart. Something in what Jesus says captures his imagination. He’s got questions. He prefaces his questions with a bit of humble acknowledgment: “We know you’re from God because of the miracles you’ve been doing.”

Jesus knows what’s going on here, and he wants to place who and what he is in proper perspective, but he uses rather cryptic language. No surprise here: in the Gospel of John Jesus often uses such language. “I tell you that no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Huh?

Nicodemus looks at him and says “that’s crazy talk. A human being is born from their mother’s womb. You’re implying that there’s another place that someone is born from, or born again from. How am I supposed to do that? Crawl back into my mother’s womb?”

A little snarky streak, perhaps...

Speaking for all among us who have given birth, believe me when I say that no mother, no matter how much she loves her adult child, wants them to attempt to reenter her womb for a second labor and delivery.

Jesus sighs and says “I was being metaphorical, my friend. It’s a different kind of birth. It’s water and it’s the Spirit. It’s not about flesh and wombs and stuff. Flesh is something that’s of the earth, and that’s just fine, but I’m talking about a rebirth of your soul, and that’s Spirit work.”

Nicodemus still looks confused by this exchange. Jesus says, “C’mon my friend. You are a spiritual leader in the community. You talk about spiritual things all the time. You should be able to comprehend this.”

And he continues. “This is the problem. I tell everybody things, and I show them things, and yet they refuse to believe me when it is evident who I am. God sent the Son of Man – that is, someone of God born of a woman – to save humanity. Not a prophet to simply tell everyone how awful they were, but to SAVE them Pay attention here: this is a good thing.”

The passage ends with no word of how this has affected Nicodemus. We'll find out much later in the story that he becomes a disciple, but at this point, who knows?

Look at what Jesus is doing here: he agrees with Nicodemus that what Jesus says and does is of God. He obliquely alludes to himself as Son of Man, sent by Father God to save humanity. He says that his words and deeds make that plain. Jesus also talks about a third way that the divine is present...there is a Spirit who is deeply involved in this care of humanity, present even at the rebirth of the soul.

It's about relationship. Intimate relationship.

Where before, people might have only talked of God "up there," a distant presence who looks and judges from afar, now we have a picture of the divine deeply enmeshed in the whole of the world. Immanent, not detached from the messiness of human beings and the world.

By the time Judaism had evolved to where it was in the time of Jesus, it was a religion of rules and strictures, with a God who could be quite harsh despite his love for humanity. It's easier to be harsh when you're looking at something from a distance. You get up close and personal, it's a different story. You can see the beauty and humanity as well as the sinfulness, and you want to love them into right relationship. The people have forgotten that side of their God.

So when Jesus is talking this way about a divine that is about creation and care and love, it sounds quite unusual to someone like Nicodemus.

And that brings me to us, here and now. I worry that we spend more time concerned about how we are judged by God than in being aware of God's

presence, whether we consider the nature of our creation, the loving teaching and healing of Jesus, or the ongoing guidance of the Spirit.

It matters less how we understand the mechanics of the Trinity than that we acknowledge and rejoice in the fact that the triune nature of the divine means we are beloved and cared for, no matter what, by the Creator, the savior, and the Comforter.

I'm grateful that I don't have to justify my admittedly limited understanding of the Trinity to get to eternal salvation – that's already been a free gift to me. I'm grateful, too, for the mystery that is the Trinity. I cannot fully understand God in this world. Even Jesus, in last week's Gospel, says "I have more to tell you but you're not ready to hear the whole thing."

That's alright. But I'm especially grateful that I can sense God's love, in its myriad forms, showed through the work of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, throughout my days. I hope you can feel that, too.

And so we pray:

We cannot know you fully, O God, but we know that we are beloved because of you. Teach us to reach out for your presence and your love when we need it, and even when we don't think we need it. Guide us to live in the same spirit of love that you show us. Bring us home to you when our days are ended, when at last we can understand the fullness of that love. And let us never forget to share that love.

Amen.

