

Trinity Sunday 2009 Year B

Texts: Isaiah 6:1-8

Psalm 29

Romans 8:12-17

John 3:1-17

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I started with a different opening petition this morning. I used this one because today is Trinity Sunday, the Sunday after Pentecost. It is probably the most dreaded Sunday every year for preachers.

It is dreaded because this is the only feast that celebrates a doctrine. It is a doctrine, however, that is foundational to our faith. Everything we believe about God is summed up in this doctrine. Everything we believe follows from it.

It is dreaded because on Trinity Sunday preachers are asked to explain an unfathomable mystery of God's love for us. But if you think about it, isn't every Sunday a celebration and wrestling with the unfathomable mystery of God's love for us?

Some preachers will wiggle out of preaching on Trinity Sunday by having their assistant preach that Sunday, or ask a guest preacher to preach for them. I asked Keith to preach for me one year because I was out of town. He accused me of leaving the country to avoid preaching on Trinity Sunday!

In seminary my Systematic Theology professor told us, "Don't preach on the doctrine, preach on the lectionary texts!" With all due respect to Dr. Hughes, I don't believe he is right. How can we understand a foundational tenet of our faith if we don't wrestle with it? As humans we are limited by our language, cognition and imagination. We can never fully understand the Trinity because it is THE divine mystery. But just because we can't understand it fully, just because it is a mystery, doesn't mean we shouldn't try.

Math was always a mystery to me, but the New Jersey Department of Education still thought I needed to try and learn it for my own good.

And, if I am really honest about it, I will tell you that I understand the Trinity, no matter how imperfectly, more than I ever understood math!

I came across a quote about the Trinity in the newsletter of a local Lutheran Church.¹ It stated, “The Trinity...if you don’t believe it, you will lose your soul. If you try to explain it, you will lose your mind.”

Harv Sanders, the long time rector of Grace-Jefferson City has said that you can’t preach on the Trinity for more than three minutes before you fall into some heresy.²

So, I am risking going crazy or becoming heretical by delivering this sermon. Daniel Benedict, a United Methodist brother, wrote, “Trinity Sunday is not for theological sissies!”³

Harv Sanders was right about becoming heretical. Many theologians believe that all heresies, at their heart, are Trinitarian heresies. At some point, any example we use will break down.

It all began with the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. Bishops from all over the world came to wrestle with the question of what was core to Christian belief. People were believing anything and everything about God, about Jesus, and the need for parameters, some consistency, was keenly felt.

So the Emperor Constantine brought all the Bishops together to hash out the divinity of Jesus. Was Jesus truly the Son of God? Was he God incarnate walking on this earth? Or was he just a man, great prophet who was close to God heart? He was certainly wise but he was also 100% human.

There was a controversy, and remember, where two or three are gathered conflict will be in the midst of them. Well, get 317 Bishops together and you are guaranteed fireworks.

The whole controversy came down to two words; two words that were identical except for one letter.

¹ Trinity Lutheran Church, Trinity Tribune, June 2009, p.17

² as told to me by the Rev. Tamsen Whistler

³ As found in John Jewell sermon, Trinity Sunday, June 18, 2000

There was a Bishop by the name of Athanasius. He wanted the word “homo-ousios” to be used in describing Jesus. Homo-ousios means, “of one substance.” It was used to describe Jesus’ relationship with God, the Father.

Another Bishop, by the name of Arius, wanted the word ‘homoi-ousios’ to be used. Homoi-ousios means “of like substance.” It is a word that describes similarity, not relationship. You need only to look at the Creed we say every Sunday, the Nicene Creed, the creed of the universal Church, to see who won the argument.

In fact, one of the great Trinitarian heresies is named the Arian Heresy, after Bishop Arius, who believed that Jesus was close to God but not divine. Many theologians credit Athanasius as saving the Christian faith by his insistence that God and Son are one.⁴

So, at its heart, the Trinity is about relationship; the relationship that exists in the God-head. It is the relationship of God within himself. And because the Trinity is about relationship, we know a personal God.

The God-head, that three in one relationship has God as Creator of all that is. It also has God as the Word, the second person of the Trinity. In John’s prologue we read, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” It is this second person of the Trinity, the Word, that came and dwelt among us in the human we know as Jesus. It is God the Word that comes as Jesus to redeem, to buy back, God’s creation from sin and death. And it is God the Holy Spirit, who is “the Lord and giver of life,” as the Creed puts it.

These are not three Gods, or as one blogger put it, “two dudes and a dove.” It is one God who manifests his presence in, to, and among us in different ways. These are not three Gods, acting independently of one another. In the Trinity when God is creating, so is God the Word and God the Holy Spirit. When God-the Word is redeeming, so is God the Creator and God the Holy Spirit. And when God the Holy Spirit is sanctifying so is God the Creator and God the Word. They all act

⁴ ibid

together because they are all one, revealing Godself in different ways. Where one is, all are, and where one is working. all are working.

Where the Western Church gets into trouble is that we often compartmentalize God. We reduce God the Three in One to three different functions, Creating, Redeeming and Sanctifying. We also tend to put God in a linear hierarchy so that God the Father is more than God the Son who is more than God the Holy Spirit.

When we do this, when we concentrate on function rather than essence, when we try to separate that which is unseparable, we commit the heresy of modalism-which is alive and well in many churches.

St. Augustine of Hippo described the Trinity as the God the lover, Jesus the beloved, and the Holy Spirit as the love that flows between them. Another description is to liken the Trinity to a water molecule. The molecule is the same regardless form. The H₂O molecule is the same whether it appears as liquid, gas, or ice.

A friend of mine who has two doctorate degrees, one in physics, was hoping I would relate the Trinity to quantum mechanics. I am very glad that he gave the explanation because, remember, I DO NOT understand math but I do, on some level understand what he wrote and it does indeed relate to the Trinity. My friend writes, “In the Copenhagen interpretation of wave mechanics a particle simultaneously exists in several states at once, only opting for a single, physically observable state when the particle is observed. According to Nobel Laureate physicist, Richard Feynman, you can use quantum mechanics to make predictions, but you can never really understand it. The word of God as written in the book of nature turns out to be just as tricky to interpret as scripture.”⁵ Tricky indeed.

John Jewell, a pastor and very fine preacher, states that in John’s Gospel, “John speaks of God, the Giver, God, the Given, and God, the Generator of new life.”⁶

⁵ Dr. William Long in e-mail correspondence 6/2/09

⁶ John Jewel sermon June 18, 2000

The Word Trinity never appears in scripture, but is implied throughout the Old and New Testaments. The Trinity, that three in one reality, was present before time and is testified to throughout scripture.

When I baptize, I do it in with the Trinitarian formula- I do it in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. In fact, without this formula, a baptism is not considered to have taken place. We are baptized into all of God, not just a piece or a part of God.

Maroslave Volf, a theologian at Yale, has said, “When we baptize in the Trinitarian formula we name the Trinity as the Church’s reality.”

The Trinity-it is real and it speaks about relationship, the relationship God has within God’s self. The mystery isn’t how to explain it, the mystery, and awe, is that we are invited to be a part of it.

Amen.