

## Trinity Sunday (5-30-2021)

Today is Trinity Sunday, and I will tell you that from long experience this is often preachers' least favorite Sunday out of the church year. As a matter of fact, I was just talking to a friend of mine yesterday who is a retired college chaplain, and she said that one of the self-care pledges she had made to herself was that she would never again preach on Trinity Sunday. It's the only Sunday of the entire church year that is focused on a doctrine. Other Sundays focus on episodes out of the life of Jesus. They focus on the great narrative of scripture. But Trinity Sunday focuses on a doctrine. And who wants to preach about doctrine? I mean, isn't that just defining and limiting God, creating intolerance? I have been reflecting on that this week and on the importance of doctrine.

While my father was dying, I sang to him many of the hymns he loved, the hymns I grew up with, the old familiar hymns. I found myself listening to the theology of the hymns as I was singing them; which ones I profoundly agreed with and which ones I said, Hmm.

Some of them were about Jesus pleading with God, the father, to forgive sinners, and the image is of an angry, judgmental father who must be persuaded by the son not to condemn sinners. Now it's true that in Romans 8, further on in the same chapter that we had as our text for today, Paul says that Jesus is at the right hand of God making intercession for us.

But Paul isn't picturing a divided God arguing with Jesus over whether to condemn or forgive. Paul is celebrating the assurance that nothing in all creation can possibly separate us from God's love. Paul affirms, just as Jesus does in John 3, that God loves us and wants to free us from all that traps us in deathly life. And the term "eternal life" is not simply about life forever. It's about life that participates in God's divinity in the here and now. It's about a transformed and transformative life.

In fact, Paul also says in Romans 8 that the Spirit intercedes for us. And that God knows what is in the mind of the Spirit because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. That's not a picture of a God divided. That's a picture of a God unified in longing for love. The Spirit and Jesus aren't begging an angry God not to condemn us. They are helping us to pray. That's what they're interceding for. They are

helping us find words for what we don't know how to express. I mean, don't you often not even know what you need? You just know you're in trouble. Right? You feel awful and you don't quite know what's going on and you just need help. You don't even know what to ask for. The Spirit and Jesus give words to what we don't know how to express.

And Paul tells us in today's reading that when we are afraid, when our own hearts condemn us, the Spirit reassures us that we're God's children. Beloved. And in this beautiful image of calling out Abba, Father, Paul compares this to little children who run to their parent for help, and they cuddle on their daddy or mommy's lap without fear, confident that they are loved and welcomed.

The doctrine of the Trinity helps us to think about issues like this, about those images of God that present Jesus as pleading with an angry God. The doctrine of the Trinity pushes back against that kind of image and shows us a God who is one: eternally undivided, one in purpose, one in love. And yet it also shows a God who is diverse, known to us not only as eternal being, author of all that is, but also as incarnate Word and Spirit that breathes through the whole creation.

One of the things that I always loved about the Easter Vigil was the way that Ethel started us off on the readings. I missed her dearly this year when we did the Vigil. She always started us off with James Weldon Johnson's poem about the creation. It begins, "I'm lonely. I'm going to make me a world." It is wonderful poetry. But actually, it is inconsistent with our theology. God didn't create out of loneliness. God was already in community, in the eternal dance of love among the members of the Trinity

God didn't need to make a world. God chose to create out of love. And one of the few outright descriptions of God in scripture is that God is love. Eternal being. God the word. Holy Spirit. All are love. "God so *loved* the world." That centrality of God as love in every person of the Trinity is so important. It's a corrective to us when we become focused on doctrine and use it to control and condemn.

I think the doctrine of the Trinity, a reflection on the teaching of the Trinity, reminds us of the need for humility. Isaiah 6 shows us a God who is immense and awesome, beyond our sight, beyond our knowing. This is regarded as one of the primary visions of God in scripture. But how much of God does the prophet see? It is the hem of God's robe that

fills the temple. And of course, it's a poetic image. It's not meant to be taken literally, but it's a way of saying we only get a glimpse. We get just a glimpse. And even that makes us shake in our shoes before the awe, before this awesome mystery.

In John 3, Jesus compares the Holy Spirit to the wind. We hear it, but we don't know where it comes from or where it is going. Its presence can shake the cedars of Lebanon, but its origin and its destination are mystery. God is ultimately a holy mystery. Though we may question and ponder and wonder we're never going to ultimately know.

It's not like a murder mystery, a puzzle to be solved, but like a beautifully mysterious night to be experienced and to revel in. It is like looking out at the night sky on one of these dark clear coastal nights and thinking, when you see millions of stars, how little you are seeing of what is out there.

Think about the scope of the universe. There are facts we know about it, truths we comprehend that we can confess with assurance. But the forces at work in a quasar or a black hole are ultimately more complex than we can quite wrap our minds around. We're working on it, but even if we comprehend that, the sheer scale and scope of the universe is beyond human knowing. It's unimaginably complex.

I like to think of that as an analogy for the Trinity, for knowing God. There are things that we can confess with assurance. There are some facts that we know, but there is also an immense mystery. We can stand out and contemplate and be in awe of and feel our place before that mystery and yet know we are beloved.

“Holy Father, Holy Son, Holy Spirit, three we name thee. Yet, in essence, only one undivided God, we claim thee. Then, adoring, bend the knee and confess the mystery.”  
Amen.