

SLD05.18.08 Trinity Sunday
EPC
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I Corinthians 13:9-13

“What’s to Know About the Trinity?”

So here we are again at Trinity Sunday. The Easter season is done, Pentecost happened with a bang, and next Sunday we begin the 30 odd Sundays of “Ordinary Time” that stretch clear to next Advent. But before we step off the platform of the high holidays of the church, before we stop singing our resurrection alleluias and get down to the business of living the Christian life, lectionary invites us to pause and tackle the doctrine of our “three-personed” God.

Although one wonders what’s left to say about a millennia-old doctrine that in its day sparked so much controversy that dissenters from the dominant view were branded heretics and thrown out of the church. Are there really any new thoughts about a doctrine from which so much of our established God-language and understanding hails?

And for that matter, how important really IS the doctrine of the Trinity anymore? Most of us have made our peace with the historical language of the church and speak it with the reflexiveness of a childhood poem. Why not let sleeping dogma lie? Didn’t Karl Rahner say with painful accuracy that if the doctrine of the Trinity were suddenly declared false, “the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged?”¹

¹ “Trinity Through the Lens of Relationship,” Steve Shussett, [Hungryhearts](#), Office of Spiritual Formation, PC(USA), Louisville, Ky. Spring 2007. P.4

But before we toss out the doctrine altogether, let's remember how it came about in the first place, just so we know what we're messing with.

Back in the beginning of the fourth century after Jesus' death, in the year 312, when Christianity was still a small, marginalized and persecuted sect (those were the days – back when faith was dangerous and people took risks for it) the Emperor Constantine won control of the Roman Empire in the Battle of Milvian Bridge. “Attributing his victory to the intervention of Jesus Christ, Constantine elevated Christianity to favored status in the empire; his motto became “one God, one Lord, one faith, one church, one empire, one emperor.”²

But what Constantine soon discovered was that the churches in Rome and Constantinople were, in fact, not one church at all, but rather a variety of groups, sects and denominations much fractured by theological disputes about...whatever. (Sound familiar?) The hot topic back then was the essential nature of Jesus Christ. People wondered, for example, if Jesus were the *Son* of God, could he actually *be God*, as well? And for that matter, if Jesus *were* fully God, could he be fully *human* at the same time? Or maybe Jesus weren't really *fully* human at all but only took on a human disguise the way Greek gods were forever doing.

Anyway, if Jesus *were* somehow human and divine at the same time, did that mean that when Jesus died on the cross, God died as well? Or was it that Jesus didn't *really* die at all, but only *appeared* to. And you think *we're* distracted

² The Book of Confessions, PC(USA), The Office of the General Assembly, Louisville, Ky., 1999. p.2.

today from the church's "true mission?!" Shoot. One of the church's true missions has always been how to get along when we disagree.

Anyway, in those 4th century days, people really took these various positions very seriously. And it wasn't just because they were stubborn. Well, it was mostly because they were stubborn. But it was also because these various understandings of Jesus and God and the Holy Spirit affected important things like how many Gods we're talking about here, and what Jesus' death and resurrection really means, and how the various "persons" of God relate to each other, including their relative authority.

Well, weary of the endless bickering, Constantine called a couple of councils in Nicaea during which what the church fathers settled once, if not for all, the orthodox way to spin the Trinity: there's only One God but with three expressions, or faces, Greek word – prosopon - each one fully, equally, simultaneously and eternally participating in the others. Three persons, one substance, one divine reality.

But what of that has meaning for us today? In an inaugural address at Columbia Seminary a few years ago, Professor Brian Wren notes that there are those for whom the doctrine of the Trinity is "...widely perceived as unnecessary, unintelligible, and unrelated to the practice of Christian faith. At an abstract level it may well be true," he says, but so what?³

This is not Wren's position, mind you. But generally speaking, at the day to day level, the doctrine seems relatively nonfunctional. However central to the

³ Brian Wren, Inaugural Address at Columbia Theological Seminary, March 27th, 2001, Decatur, Ga. p.2.

historical meaning of Christian faith, the Trinity remains, says Wren, largely marginal to its practice.”

I mean, take away the Trinity’s seniority, grandeur, and the imprimatur of the ancients in charge, what, really, has the doctrine of the Trinity to say to our hearts today? Point a bright light at your average modern day believer and I’m pretty sure most of us would confess, “not much.”

Still, notice how it seeps into our weekly worship services. Every Sunday morning, God calls us to worship. Then, in our confessional sequence, we ask for forgiveness through Jesus Christ. Then, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we listen for God’s living Word in preaching, in prayer and in song. When we celebrate communion, we respond to Jesus’ invitation to the table, we come and eat with him, take him into ourselves, become one with him, experiencing, through the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ’s presence with, and within, us. Thus nourished, we ourselves bear Christ to the world, becoming at our best, Jesus’ living resurrected body to the world.

Deeply embedded in the intent and the exercise of Reformed Worship, Trinitarian doctrine shapes how we “go at” God, defining who God is to us and how we can participate in the divine. Its language pulses with connection, with relationship, with intimacy - among the persons of the Trinity – the Creator God, who sends God’s most Beloved One to live and die and live again, who lives for us, for all creation, through the life-giving, love-generating, hope-sustaining force of the Holy Spirit. Father, Son and Holy Ghost, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, all inseparably wrapped up in each other like a pile of sleeping

puppies the effect of which quite simply opens the heart. Why would you even *want* to pry them apart to define their respective edges?

Equally intimate is the relationship the Trinity invites between God and us.

Some of you may remember that I mentioned last year on Trinity Sunday Barbara Brown Taylor's book called Leaving Church, in which she writes that 'her Christian faith is 'more relational than doctrinal.'"⁴ That she, like many Christians, like many people in this congregation, is , "hungry for new ways to worship and experience God." Steve Shussett of the PC(USA) Office of Spiritual Formation notes that "it is through the lens of relationship that we might most fully explore the Trinity and in particular Trinitarian spirituality."⁵

And what *is* "Trinitarian spirituality?"

One theologian says Trinitarian spirituality is "the simple call to know God as directly as we can know any person."⁶ And what does it take to know any person? You gotta hang out with 'em.

Of course, there are different ways of hanging out with people. You got your acquaintances, the ones you think about pretty much only when you run into them like our neighbor down the street, or our co-worker three cubicles over, or the mail carrier we greet on the weekends. "Being an acquaintance of God may mean think of God only one Sunday mornings, or when someone says, "Let us pray."⁷ If we merely show up on Sunday morning, say "hey" to God, and go on

⁴ Atlanta Journal and Constitution, "Faith and Values, June 3, 2006.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Bruce Chilton, "St. Augustine and the Trinity." *The Living Pulpit*. April/June 1998, 8:2:17.

⁷ Shussett, p. 5.

about our business, God is merely an acquaintance. God as Creator can often feel like an arms-length acquaintance.

Then there's God as friend – spend more time with God, you're liable to move into some sort of friendship. You begin to get to know each other – you talk, but listen, too. You begin to see things from each other's perspective. You may not always agree, but a certain fondness grows between you. You find yourself opening up. Showing your butt once in a while. Making each other mad. Making each other laugh. Sharing a stiff drink.

And what do you call God then? “*GOD*” sounds a bit remote. Somehow chewing the fat or sharing a joke with “*GOD*” doesn't sound right. Maybe then you call God “Jesus,” someone you can relate to. Someone you can trust. Or maybe you favor Jesus' more functional name – “Christ.” Or maybe you call your heart's companion, ‘Bubba’ – it makes not a whit of difference. Your heart knows who it is, and would recognize him by any name.

Then there's a more intimate relationship with God. (There's always a more intimate relationship with God than the one we have.) But this third type of relationship is marked by a kind of rootedness in one another that doesn't require conversation, or discipline, or ritual to sustain. Think of spouses who have been married for 50 years and still like each other. I know there aren't many, but consider what these two know about each other, the habits of the heart they've established, the things they DON'T need to say. A lot of their time together might sound like silence but the communion they share simply no longer requires spoken word. Their hearts have simply taken up residence in one another's, and

they have become as one as is humanly possible. Only when you and the Holy Spirit take up residence in one another's hearts, well, the divine possibilities for Oneness are, of course, infinite.

"Trinitarian spirituality" is the simple call to know God as directly as we can know any person. The way I see it, the three persons of the Trinity each issue invitations to know God with a slightly different spin.

Sure, how those Three can also be One is a mystery. Sure, those 4th century white guys in charge fussed endlessly about how best to describe the Indescribable. And sure, we're not just a whole lot better at God-talk today. But even if we were, like Paul says, in the course of our lives we're flat only ever going to get to know God *in part*.

Still, faith, says John Calvin is "a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded (on) the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our *minds* and sealed upon our *hearts* through the Holy Spirit."⁸

Or, put more simply, faith is believing deep in our hearts that "God is *for* us. God is *with* us. God is *in* us."

God is *for* us. God is *with* us. God is *in* us.

Never mind knowing exactly how fully to name, define or know God. Never mind figuring out the complexities of the Trinity. God *for* us. God *with* us. God *in* us. If we could just grasp *that*, I mean really *know* it, that would be enough.

To the glory of God. Amen.

⁸ John Calvin, The Institutes of the Christian Religion, III.2.7

, which, in retrospect, may seem a little silly. And it's true, too, at least for me, that the sometimes I feel impatient with the limitations of the doctrine of the Trinity they came up with.

But if we threw out the Trinity altogether, I'd miss its language – not the patriarchal spin so much as its inclusive intention. Tweak the church fathers' culturally determined monikers a little to, say, God the Parent, the Creator, the Lover; Christ the Firstborn, the Sustainer, the Beloved One; the Holy Spirit as God's Breath on our cheek, God's Whisper in our hearts, Christ among us, Christ within us, Love itself; and I can hear better what those church fathers were trying to express.

If we threw out the Trinity, I'd miss what it expresses about the nature of God. The nutty moving target theology of the Trinity makes sure we understand that God is not This or That or That, but This **and** This **and** That **and** more, more than we could ever name.

If we threw out the Trinity, I might miss some of the grand hymns and high church associations I have with Trinity Sunday. But more than that, I would miss the intimacy of relationship the Trinity reflects between God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

Still, I'm glad that today we're asked not so much to understand the construct of the Trinity, but rather to live into trusting it. Elders and ministers to

be ordained are asked not whether we grasp Trinitarian doctrine but whether we can “...trust in Jesus Christ your Savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and Head of the Church, ...and *through him believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.*”

Whether you and I grasp the mystery of the Trinity or not, can we trust its implications? Can we live by it? Those of us who seek to follow Jesus, can we trust that Jesus and God are One? That the Holy Spirit and God are One? That God and Jesus are fully present in our lives through the Holy Spirit? Or perhaps even more importantly to a relational faith, can we trust the precious, caring, involved, and deeply relevant embrace of the Spirit's witness with our spirit that we are children of God?”

To the glory of God. Amen.