

SLD05.30.10 Trinity Sunday
Emory Presbyterian Church
Romans 5:1-5
John 16:12-15

“Imagine”

Anybody noticed I've been entitling my sermons here of late with rock songs of the 60's and 70's?

When we celebrated the Wilderness two weeks ago, my sermon was called “Wild Thing, I Think I Love You.” Last week on Pentecost Sunday, it was “Come On, Baby, Light My Fire.” This week, as we turn to our annual tackling of the Trinity, I'm borrowing from John Lennon's 1971 release, “Imagine.”

Anybody notice? If so, no one has said a word to me, which is why I'm pointing it out to you. Maybe you've gotten used to weird word formulations coming from the pulpit. Or maybe you just figured I'd launched yet another sermon series when you weren't looking – Rock Theology.

It's not a sermon series. In content, anyway. Probably has more to do with my fast approaching 40th high school reunion. In any case, once I noticed I'd used rock songs it twice as sermon titles, it seemed natural, “three” being the number of divine fullness and all,¹ to complete the triad. Put Emory Church, Trinity Sunday, and my current frame of mind into the mix and voila! Before it was even written, today's sermon was called “Imagine,” after John Lennon's 1971 hit - number three in the Billboard Hot 100 AND number 3 on Rolling Stone's list of the 500 Greatest Songs of All Time.²

Never mind that Lennon described “Imagine” as “anti-religious, anti-nationalistic,

¹ <http://www.greatdreams.com/three/three.htm>

² [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imagine_\(song\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imagine_(song))

anti-conventional and anti-capitalistic,”³ and that the very last thing he had on his mind was an American reformed protestant sermon about our three person’d God (or maybe precisely *because* of those reasons) “Imagine” seemed just the title to call to engage the time-worn doctrine of the Trinity a little differently.

You know, I’ve been preaching sermons in this church on the doctrine of the Trinity on and off since the year 2000. And having just re-read most of them this week, most of them are not too bad, if I say so myself. Don’t know if any of it ever stuck but repeatedly I’ve shared with you the history of the doctrine, the 4th century debates that gave rise to it, what those early church fathers were trying to say, what they were trying to protect, and what they did to people who didn’t agree with them.

It’s cost a lot of effort, and a lot of lives, over the millennia to get us to believe that the One God reveals God’s Self to us in three communal, coexistent, and co-equal “persons.” But after all this time, we’ve wondered, you and I, just how relevant the doctrine remains, how much it really matters to anybody any more.

In 2001 I drew heavily from Columbia Professor Brian Wren’s address on the occasion of the installation of the Seminary new (at the time) president, in which he makes the case that the Trinity remains both central and of dynamic importance to the Christian faith, although he warns against inflexible use of the traditional Trinitarian formula like “an old man, a young man, and a third thing,” (Gail Ramshaw), or an all-male, one parent family with either a resident phantom (if we say Ghost) or a sip of Bourbon (if we say Spirit.) There may be many dynamic characterizations of our three-

³ *Lennon in America*, by [Geoffrey Giuliano](#), quoted in [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imagine_\(song\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imagine_(song))

in-one God, Wren argues, but of special importance is the “*relationship* among the three partners, or persons, or ways of God’s reaching out to creation. It’s the *relationship* among the persons of the Trinity, their “dynamic communion, eternal agreement, order without subordination and mutual love,” that continues to model for believers today the principles by which we try to organize and govern our church, shape our worship and grow our relationships with one another.⁴

In 2006 we examined together the mystery, or confusing illogic, depending on your point of view, of Trinitarian-speak, and how it is due in large part to the insufficiency of human language to capture the Divine. Stridently anti-systematic Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein asserted (and dollars to doughnuts, John Lennon would have agreed with him), “... We could say that the limits of language are the limits of the world... that the limits of my language are the limits of my world. And in that respect, whatever I say must limit the world, must make it finite.”⁵ So whatever we say about God necessarily makes of God something finite. As a result, notes Georgia poet Coleman Barks, “...in the embrace of living fullness...the language-shuffling mind remains frustrated...”⁶ Good thing, I remarked to you in 2006, that we seekers are called less to *understand* God or the construct of the Trinity, than to live into *trusting* it.⁷

But how, or even *why*, should we keep trying to live into trusting God through a dusty, finite, fourth century doctrine?

⁴ SLD06.10.01, “A Holy Conundrum,” Emory Presbyterian Church, Jill Oglesby Evans, p. 7. Drawn from Wren’s address, March 2001.

⁵ <http://www.languagehat.com/archives/000567.php>

⁶ Coleman Barks and John Moyne, *The Drowned Book*, Ecstatic and Earthy Reflections of Bahauudin, the Father of Rumi. HarperSanFrancisco, 2005, p. 133.

⁷ SLD06.11.06, “Orthodoxy vs. Intimacy,” Emory Presbyterian Church, Jill Oglesby Evans, p. 8

In 2008 we turned to John Calvin for guidance, distilling from his thought the idea that “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. Now *that’s* a Trinitarian formulation most of us could hang our hat on, though it seems to lack a certain majesty. And, of course, it makes God all about *us*.

So here we are again on Trinity Sunday, trying to breathe meaning and relevance yet again into the ancient conundrum. Personally, I find myself unenthused at the prospect of yet again going through the exercise of defining or defending this 4th century doctrine and its drama. And equally unexcited about holding forth some new case for understanding the Trinity via this example or that analogy. I’m tired of doing all the work. Time for you to figure out for yourselves what was behind that 4th century drama and debate, ‘cause you *know* there was *something*. I mean, we’re talking an intersection of brilliant minds and passionate faith in Constantinople. What was it they were trying to get at?

I don’t mean to dismiss traditional Trinitarian language. It’s not that I’ve turned Unitarian on you. As a professional practitioner of the reformed tradition, I’ve found Trinitarian language immensely helpful in my clumsy efforts to relay what I can about the Divine. Trinitarian language has been helpful to me, *personally*.

In my own faith journey, for example, I started out feeling pretty comfortable with the concept of God as Creator, Source, Alpha, but somewhat less at home with that perpetually patient lady with a beard, Jesus. So I sort of skipped over him for a while and found myself keeping more company with that less polite and predictable misfit of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. Honestly, it’s only in the recent decade or two that the

incarnated Jesus and I made a stab at companioning each other in any intimate sort of way.

In any case, given the vagaries of any authentic spiritual journey, I find myself genuinely appreciative of our Trinitarian basket. I just don't feel today like reflecting on anybody else's spin on it. Barks again: "The human heart is unassailable, relentlessly buoyant, but very weary of arguing the names and forms of the divine." (p. 140.) What I want instead is for us somehow to dip into our own urge, our own knowing, our own capacity, to discover, to relate to, to define, to communicate, the divine. Not so we can replace the doctrine of the Trinity with something else, as if we would be more clever or accurate or "relevant" than the Council of Nicaea, but so that we might push ourselves to *imagine* God ourselves – dare I say "reimagine?" What if we were to start from scratch, what if *we* were the worthies at Nicaea? What would *we* come up with?

It's one thing to give God a name. But to try to capture, describe, convey, the wholeness, the fullness, the *pleroma*, of God with *three* names or concepts or persons, now *that* takes some imagination.

I challenged myself, and kept coming up with God as a continuum. For example, God as Doer, Be-er, and Dreamer, strikes me as God as an "Existential Continuum." God as Alpha, Omega and everything in between - a "Time Continuum." God as White, Black and Grey - a "Color Continuum." God as Seed, Plant, and Fruit; Male, Female and Offspring, - a "Creation Continuum." God as Inside, Outside, and the Boundary In Between - a "Space Continuum." God as the Whole, the Parts, and the Connections - a "Fractal Continuum." God as Love, Lover and the Beloved – a "Continuum of the Heart."

And so forth. I could go on. And so could you. Maybe we should at some Wednesday night gathering. Because if we did, at the very least I'll bet we'd gain a little sympathy, a little appreciation, for those 4th century apologists knocking themselves (and others) out trying to come up with a generally acceptable manner of describing the Indescribable. Bless their hearts.

Seriously. Imagine being responsible for naming or conveying the Whole Holy, for communicating the nature of God to everyone you know, and everybody coming after you, in three measly words or concepts or ideas. Could be exhilarating, that much responsibility. Should be humbling. Looks like those early Christian God-namers got so exhilarated by the process, they maybe forgot the humble part. Maybe even the "process" part. The never ending, forever incomplete, process of naming and explaining God.

Still, try it yourself and see if you can do any better. It has to be done, for, as Wittgenstein notes, "What cannot be imagined cannot even be talked about."⁸ So, imagine. Imagine yourself a way to describe or name or capture or convey our three-person'd God, and see what *you* come up with.

One recent Trinitarian imagining that caused a lot of stir and delighted many can be found in William P. Young's novel, The Shack.⁹ In The Shack, Young makes of each person of the Trinity an interesting character. God is an African American woman named "Papa." Jesus is a man from the Middle East. And the Holy Spirit is Sarayu, a sparkly, protean Asian woman.¹⁰

⁸ Journal entry (12 October 1916), p. 84e. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ludwig_Wittgenstein

⁹ William P. Young, The Shack, Windblown Media, Los Angeles, Calif., 2007.

¹⁰ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/mayweb-only/122-51.0.html>, **The Trinity: So What?** *The Shack allegorizes a tricky but foundational doctrine.* Collin Hansen | posted 5/30/2008 10:36AM

The Shack opens in the context of tragedy. Four years have passed since the cruel murder of the main character, Mack's, six-year-old daughter. Still enveloped in grief, Mack receives a strange invitation to come to meet someone at the very shack where his daughter was killed. Doubtful, but drawn to the meeting, Mack heads for the Oregon wilderness and the dilapidated old shack. Following is the scene where Mack meets his Maker.

"...the door flew open, and he was looking directly into the face of a large beaming African-American woman. Instinctively (Mack) jumped back, but he was too slow. With speed that belied her size, (the woman) crossed the distance between them and engulfed him in her arms...."[\[1,p.82\]](#)

"Just as she turned... a small, distinctly Asian woman merged from behind her.... Mack then glanced past her and notices that a third person had emerged... a man. He appeared Middle Eastern."[\[1,p.84\]](#)

"When they finally stopped giggling, the large woman... said, 'Okay, we know who you are, but we should probably introduce ourselves to you. ...you could call me what Nan [Mack's wife] does: Papa.'...

"And I,' interrupted the man, who looked to be about in his thirties.... 'I am Hebrew....'

"Mack was suddenly staggered by his own realization. "Then, you are...."

"Jesus? Yes....'

"Mack stood dumbfounded.... Just as he was about to crumple to his knees, the Asian woman stepped closer and deflected his attention. 'And I am Sarayu [the Holy Spirit, Creativity].' she said...

"Thoughts tumbled over each other as Mack struggled to figure out what to do....
Since there were three of them, maybe this was a Trinity sort of thing....

'Then,' Mack struggled to ask, 'which one of you is God?'"

"'I am,' said all three in unison.'" (pp. 86-87)

It's an intense, gripping and heart-opening story, The Shack, "a fresh portrayal of the nature of the triune God who meets us in the midst of our worst pain to bring about transformation."¹¹ And oh, did it spur some heated debate as theologians, scholars and the faithful all argued about its license, its risks, its apostasy. Me, I liked it. Very much. For all its limitations, what I liked best about The Shack was its fresh *imagining* of an active, loving, intervening God whose elusive fullness, and kindness, and humor, and redemption staggers...well...the mind.

It's not that Young gets it "right." That Young's imaginings, however popular or well crafted, are any more faithful or accurate or ultimate than those of the 4th century church fathers. There *is* no getting God right.

Writes Barks, "...Nothing works. Language cannot *be* this great love." Still, he says, "when anyone *tries* to say the truth, we feel the presence; something of it does come through. We cannot ever say truth, but trying helps. (pp. 134-135)..." He goes on, "This plane we live on is where nobody knows much of anything. But we can love, and even become love. We just can't hold love in words, or convey it. ...That mystery," he says, "as it is realized in some coherent way comes to be called faith...."

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¹¹ "Inside The Shack: the Trinity makes the best-seller list," [Christian Century, Oct 21, 2008](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1058/is_21_125/ai_n30938485/pg_2/?tag=content;col1) by Jason Byassee, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1058/is_21_125/ai_n30938485/pg_2/?tag=content;col1

The mystery of God, as it is realized in some (I'll add, temporarily) coherent way comes to be called "faith."

Faith is the lens through which those 4th century fathers peered with their imagination. Faith is the lens through which we peer with ours. Rarely, if ever, seeing with complete clarity, but occasionally, if we're lucky, or blessed, glimpsing a truth that gives us peace with God; that grants us access to God; that pours God's love into our hearts. (Ro. 5:1-5) For shorthand, we Christians summarize this communion as the Trinity. But language cannot *be* this great love; doctrine cannot capture it, which is why Jesus sent the Spirit of Truth, to guide us.

To the glory of God. Amen.