

SLD05.22.05 Trinity Sunday
Emory Presbyterian Church
Matthew 28: 16-20
Jill Oglesby Evans

“A Holy Conundrum”

Today is Trinity Sunday. The Easter season is over. Pentecost has happened. Next Sunday we begin the 30 odd Sundays of “Ordinary Time” that stretch clear to Advent. But before we step off the platform of the high holidays of the church, before we stop singing our alleluias, before we roll up our sleeves and get down to the business of discipleship, lectionary invites us to pause and tackle a doctrine of our faith as fundamental as it is baffling - our ‘three-personed’ God.

God in three persons – Father, Son and Holy Ghost, as the Apostles’ Creed puts it; Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, in more inclusive language; Love, Lover and Beloved, as breathed by the mystics, all verbal attempts at expressing the nature of our inexpressible God, and of God’s relationship to humankind.

But step back from the intimacy of faith or the assumption of tradition and the Christian doctrine of the Trinity sounds suspiciously like a “buy one, get two free” blue plate special. Three gods in one? Three persons, one God? Anybody here grasp how God can be fully God, fully Jesus and fully the Holy Spirit, all at once and forever, and still be one God? The ‘water as liquid, ice and steam’ metaphor may work for kids but water ain’t all those things at once the way the Trinity says God is God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit all at once. So here we are again with another cumbersome, illogical article of faith that just doesn’t “make sense” in any linear, rational sort of way, only this one isn’t even mentioned in scripture!

One wonders why we bother with it anymore. Why do we post-modern 21st century Presbyterian Christians bother anymore with the cumbersome, illogical, double-, or should I say “triple-“ speak of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity? Why does our faith tradition insist that the doctrine of the Trinity is as important today as it was to John Calvin in the 16th century? And before him, to the 4th century church fathers of the Council of Nicea?

Well, first of all, it might be important to understand that the language of the Trinity is not intended to describe God in any sort of absolute way, like we might describe a large building or a work of art with certain quantifiable features. Nor is the doctrine of the Trinity meant to offer a metaphor or simile; we don't say that God is “like” a Trinity. Rather, the language of the Trinity is designed to express how Christians understand God's relationship with us through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. The Trinity is a way of describing in a confessional sense *what we believe about God*.

Remember that one thing that distinguishes Presbyterians is that we are a confessional church in both senses of the word: through our prayers of confession, we confess our complicity in sin, and through our creeds, we confess what we believe about God. The Doctrine of the Trinity falls under the second, creedal, aspect of confession.

The word ‘creed’ itself comes from the Latin ‘credo,’ which means ‘I believe.’ And throughout the ages, the church, usually through councils but sometimes through individuals, has composed numerous creeds that clarify what the church does and does not believe during particular moments in history. We Presbyterians, believing as we do the church is ‘ever reforming,’ ever renewing, ever clarifying its understanding of God

through Jesus Christ in the particularity of each age, intentionally embrace certain of these historical Christian creeds that we believe *best* capture the revelation of the church in particular periods. The anthology, or collection, of Presbyterian creeds is called our Book of Confessions. And the two creeds in our Book of Confessions that most directly address the tricky doctrine of the Trinity are the first two creeds in the book, the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds.

Now I need to give you a little background, a little history lesson.

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, 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.’”¹

But the new emperor soon found that the churches in Rome and Constantinople were, in fact, not one church at all! Rather, the various communions were much fractured by fractious “theological disputes about the nature of Christ, long a point of controversy. If Jesus were the Son of God, how could he be God, too? And even if he *were* God, how could he be human at the same time?

And say Jesus is human and divine at the same time, does that mean God died on the cross when Jesus did? Or were they really two different gods, so that Jesus died but God didn't.... Or maybe Jesus didn't *really* die at all, but only appeared to. In fact, maybe Jesus wasn't really *human* at all but only took on a human disguise the way Greek gods were forever doing.

Or, you know, maybe Jesus was only half-human – that would be the half that died. And the other half that resurrected, why that would be the divine half. Or finally, maybe Jesus wasn't fully God *or* fully human, but some weird mutant of the two.

I'm telling you – we think *we've* got problems – these folks were truly cross-eyed with controversy about the nature of Jesus and the relationship between Jesus and God. And the Holy Spirit, well, who knew *what* the heck to do with her!?

Well, part of the brouhaha boiled down to a heated debate between one Arius, a priest of the church in Alexandria, and Athanasius, eventually Bishop of Alexandria. Arius asserted that the divine Christ, the Word through whom all things have their existence, was *created* by God, hear that? *created* by God - before the beginning of time. Therefore, whereas the divinity of Christ was *similar* (homoiousis) to the divinity of God, as a Son is *similar* to the Father, it was *not of the same essence*. Jesus is a creation of God; God and Jesus are not one.

This hierarchical construct of Jesus and God *totally* flipped out bishop Alexander, and his associate and successor, Athanasius, both of whom affirmed passionately that the divinity of Christ is of the *same* essence (homoousis) as the divinity of God the Father. To hold otherwise, said Alexander and Athanasius, was to open the church to the possibility of polytheism. And of primary importance to Alexander and Athanasius was the Oneness, of God.

Now note here that between the Greek words 'homoiousis' and 'homousis' there is only one letter's difference, an 'i'; in Greek, an 'iota.' Whence comes the expression, 'it doesn't make one iota of difference.' But back in the 4th century, that iota made ALL

¹ The Book of Confessions, PC(USA), The Office of the General Assembly, Louisville, Ky., 1999. p.2.

the difference between believing whether Jesus was similar to God or that Jesus WAS God.

What complicated the debate between Rome and Alexandria even further was that these two mainline churches literally did not use the same language to talk about God. The Western church, headquartered in Rome, spoke Latin, while the Eastern church headquartered in Constantinople, spoke Greek. With competing languages, never mind cultural images and religious imaginations, it was *very* difficult for the global church to come to any agreement about how to talk about the nature of Jesus, and by extension, the relationship between God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

To counter the widening rift within the church of his vast empire, Constantine convened two councils in Nicea for the purpose of debating the positions of Arius and Athanasius. Arius lost. (And in the church, the rather unforgiving moniker applied to those who lose is 'heretic.')

And the Holy Fathers who won (I like to think if there had been more central Holy Mothers at the time, the whole mess might not have taken so long to tidy up) in any case, the Holy Fathers who won decided that the church was called to preserve both the *unity* of God, God's *oneness*, and, at the same time, the *coequal* status, the '*sameness*' if you will, of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. .

God in three "persons" is how we say it today. Back then they settled on the Greek word *prosopon*, which means "face" or "countenance" or "expression." One God and three expressions, or faces, of God, each one fully and equally and simultaneously and eternally participating in the others. Three persons, one substance, one divine reality. The Trinity.

Make sense? Not remotely. No question but that on the face of it (no pun intended), the Trinity is a conundrum, a riddle, a mystery that cannot be adequately dissected and explained because the parts, quite literally, do not add up. It's a case of 1+1+1 equalling 1, which, of course, defies logic. But then, so does God. Which is why every time we try to capture God with our words and concepts, we inevitably butt up against the limitations of finite language trying to explain the infinite.

But remember that the purpose of the doctrine of the Trinity is not so much to *explain* God (as if we could) as it is *to confess what we Christians believe* about God, the nature of Jesus Christ and the role of the Holy Spirit.

As elaborated in the Apostles' Creed, which, of course, was not written by the scriptural Apostles at all but developed from the 2nd through the 8th centuries, we "believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." This is the 'prosopon' of the sovereign God of creation, the God of nature, the One who creates all things, who gives life and takes it away, the omnipotent, transcendent, impersonal and inaccessible Other, before whom we can only fall on our knees in awe and praise and adoration.

Many people in our, and other, cultures believe we know this God through nature. And so we do. Who of us has not experienced a palpable sense of the divine presence from a mountain top, or by rushing waters, or in the softening of day to dusk. Nature is a magnificent expression of God's creative power and beauty. But in the end, nature is finally impersonal, dispassionate and objective, exhibiting neither conscience nor mercy. A tsunami has no compassion for the lives it destroys; a cat, no pity on its prey; and nothing is forgiven in the path of a falling tree.

Surely our God *is* the God of nature, of creation, but as Christians we know and understand our God not merely through nature, but even more powerfully through the revelation of the Trinity's second 'prosopon,' through the face of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Through the human Jesus who walked on earth, the way he behaved, the truths he taught, the miracles he wrought, we know about God's love and justice. Through Jesus' death on a cross, we understand about both humanity's sin and God's *forgiveness* of it. Through Jesus' resurrection from the dead, we witness God's incomparable, inscrutable, inexorable power over death.

The God whom we experience in Jesus Christ is a personal God, compassionate, accessible, merciful. Throughout his life, Jesus modeled not only the "nature" of his Abba, his Daddy, but also revealed how we humans are to respond to God's gift of love – that is, with love for God, and compassion and forgiveness for one another.

But then this Jesus, priest, prophet, teacher, lover, died, and was buried, and his life on earth was ended. According to our faith tradition, after his death, Jesus rose again and "sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty," wherever the heck *that* is! Wherever it is, it wasn't, and isn't, with the church in Jerusalem, nor over on Peachtree at First Church, nor downtown at Central, nor here at Emory Church, either. Wherever the right hand of God the Father Almighty is, I reckon it ain't here on earth. But Jesus also said that after he was gone, he's send back a Friend, a Counselor, a Sustainer, an Inspirer, a Mover of minds and an Opener of hearts, who would tend to, and teach, and guide and challenge his followers.

And good to his promise, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit, Wisdom, Nurture, Comfort, Challenge, that 'still, small voice' that rags our conscience and moves our heart, pentecostal wind and fire, that is the third 'prosopon,' or person, of the Trinity, God's most intimate Self in relation to us.

The doctrine of the Trinity expresses what we as Christians believe about God – sovereign Creator, compassionate Redeemer, present, persistent, transforming Sustainer – God in three persons, a blessed Trinity - the mystery into which we are baptized. A mystery, after all, that does not define God so much as it defines us, as seekers and followers of Jesus Christ. And as seekers and followers of Jesus Christ, our job is not so much to try to figure out the mystery of the Holy as it is to spend our lives discovering and responding to its comfort, guidance and challenge.

So don't let this nutty, confusing doctrine of our "three-person'd" God be too much of a stumbling block to you. But don't dismiss it, either. Sure, it's a holy conundrum. But don't you notice? So is God, so is life, and so are we.

To the glory of God. Amen.