

More Than We Can Name or Know
Isaiah 6:1-8; John 3:1-17
June 7, 2009
Kimberly L. Clayton

God is more than we can name or know. But because language is our primary way of communicating, of relating, we keep trying. We desire to name God because we desire to know God. We never get it exactly right, of course, but that has never stopped any of us from trying. Think of Isaiah in the astounding passage we just read...confronted with the unspeakable holiness of God, in a vision larger than life, Isaiah nevertheless tries to describe the indescribable: God seated on a throne; the hem of God's robe alone filled the temple; seraphs with six wings flew, crying out the tri-fold "Holy, holy, holy!"; the place shook with the sound of voices and smoke filled the room.

Think of Nicodemus from our second reading. He came to Jesus by night...trying to understand who Jesus was. He knew Jesus was a Rabbi who had come from God, but...what else...what more was he? The words that follow only got Nicodemus more confused...I must be born from above? Born again? How can a grown person climb back in the womb? What does it mean to be born of water and the Spirit? As Jesus describes the Spirit blowing where it will...it all seems to blow right over Nicodemus' head. He drops out of the conversation...in fact, drops out of the whole narrative. Retreating, perhaps, into the darkness of his unknowing. Or perhaps he just needed time to think about the confusion of words and meanings he had just heard. It isn't clear if Nicodemus is still around to hear Jesus say that God loves the world so much, God sent the Son not to condemn us, but to save every one of us. Later in this Gospel, there will be some hint that Nicodemus had indeed understood, at least to some degree.

Today is Trinity Sunday, the one day of the Christian year that vexes preachers and laypeople alike. It asks us to speak about the God who is more than we can name or know. To devote a Sunday to the Trinity compels us to try, once again, to put into words us what it means for God to be One and also Three—to be Three, yet One. Trying to explain how God is always and eternally One, yet comes to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit...has never been easy. In fact, it can get you into a lot of hot water. Sometimes it can even get you exiled and labeled a heretic.

But even that hasn't stopped some people from trying.

Do you mind going back with me in time? Way, way back to the years 100-200 A.D. For the first couple of centuries, there was no well-formulated "doctrine of the Trinity." Communities of disciples started springing up all over the place, and spoke fluidly of God as Father, God as Son and God as Spirit. In those first centuries, there was no centralized church government, no theology books or ordination exams, no Presbytery regional meetings, no Book of Order or Common Worship. People met and worshipped and developed a life together that made sense in the midst of the particular culture surrounding them. Yet there were some basics of the faith all of these communities of disciples held no matter where they lived...belief in the one true God who made heaven and earth; belief in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord who was raised from the dead; and an experience of the Holy Spirit bringing healing and new life and the gift of faith. Each group of believers may have had their own way of worshiping and living the faith daily; may have had their own take on the details of their beliefs, but formulated doctrines were not the primary concern. What the first Christians were really struggling with was figuring out how to live the faith as a new community of disciples; how to stay alive...defending themselves against all kinds of wild accusations, withstanding persecution...even being prepared for martyrdom.

Once, I was in a group with other North American-type pastors discussing church websites and how hard it is to keep them updated. Oh, we were all consumed with the topic and lamenting how hard it was to keep our websites current. A South African pastor was with us and I asked him if churches in South Africa had websites, too. He paused and then said with piercing clarity, "Well, when one is dealing with life and death every day in the church, one does not have time to worry about websites." The church of the first two centuries was busy dealing with life and death.

But by 325 A.D., everything had changed. Constantine became the Emperor of a vast empire. His mother had converted to Christianity and even then mothers could influence their children. Constantine became interested in the Christian faith. This was timely, because he was also looking for a way to unify the far-flung holdings of his empire. The Christian faith looked like just the kind of cement he needed. So under his rule, the once-threatened church became the favored church. He and his mother gave money to construct churches all over the empire.

Christianity, as part of the power structure, enjoyed enough peace and leisure that it could get more organized as an institution, a vast church. Bishops were appointed over regions of the empire to oversee church life; the first historian of the church came out of this time period, Eusebius. And Church Fathers, theologians, began to write commentary on Scripture and theology. Liturgy for worship proliferated. This new faith seemed to be just what had Constantine hoped for...except...different parts of the church from different regions could not all agree. And on various things.

One of the things that became bitterly debated was the nature and meaning of the Trinity. Especially how God the Father and Jesus the Son were related to each other. In fact, this disagreement became so deep that it threatened to tear apart the empire itself. For his part, Constantine, as one church historian put it, was not so concerned with the unity of God, but he was very concerned with the unity of his kingdom.ⁱ So, he called together 300 bishops for a meeting. They were to work out their differences and write a creed that would spell out the basics that every Christian should believe. They met in Nicea, located in what is now Turkey.

Like our own General Assembly meetings every other year, a small number of people came to the meeting sure of the rightness of their viewpoint on opposing sides. The majority of the 300 had no clue there even was a problem about the Trinity. On one side were bishops who were adamant that the Son was not divine like God, but was created by God. Therefore Jesus was not God, but subordinate to God. A slightly larger group was just as adamant that the Son was divine and was of God from eternity. It was bitter debate. In the end, the people who said that the Son was divine and one with God were the victors. They wrote the Nicene Creed and every bishop there had to sign it before he left or face exile. A few did refuse to sign it and suffered the consequences. It took another 50 years of fighting before the Nicene Creed really took hold around 381.

This makes it the earliest official creed of the Christian church and it is the only creed shared by both the Western Roman Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church. As our most universal Creed, it is the one we recite on Communion Sundays. When we recite it later in the service, you'll see the careful, complex and ancient language in it that stresses that the Son (and the Spiritⁱⁱ) are one and eternal with God.

I used to think about the years of struggle and debate that it took to settle on the wording of that creed. How some were exiled and a whole empire was saved from fracturing by the Nicene Creed. I used to think about all of that when a particular member of a church I served would shake my hand at the door after church. If the Nicene or the Apostles' Creed had been used in worship, he'd say with real energy and conviction, "I didn't say that creed today. I just don't believe everything in it and I'm not going to say it!" There, I'd think, a whole chunk of church history and anguish tossed out so easily, deemed unacceptable by Richard's individual assessment!

Language about the Trinity has continued to be an issue for the church. As recently as our 2006 General Assembly, we Presbyterians argued over how to talk about the Trinity. A document written to help congregations understand the Trinity was to be voted on by the Commissioners that year. It was entitled: "The Trinity: God's Love Overflowing." Only love was not overflowing as the paper was debated. It was meant "to help our church renew its faith in the triune God," since many Presbyterians seem to think the doctrine of the Trinity is "dark and confusing" and also without "practical significance for everyday Christian faith and life."

Some people thought/think the only language we need is to call God Father-Son-Holy Spirit. The paper offered alternative language meant to broaden our image of the triune God. Creator-Redeemer-Sustainer, used by many of us as way of getting around male-centered language for God—was said not to be *names* for God, but *descriptions* of what God does. So you can imagine how they reacted to suggestions like: God the Speaker, God the Word Enfleshed, and God the Enlivening Breath. How about God the Lover, God the Beloved, and God the Love that Binds Lover and Beloved? Who cares if that was from the likes of Augustine? This one was a real hit with some: God the Compassionate Mother, God the Beloved Child, and God the Life-Giving Womb. So what if John Calvin used womb-language to describe the Spirit giving birth to the church! God is our Rainbow of Promise, our Ark of Salvation, and our Dove of Peace was not on the hit parade either. The ancient, John of Damascus, may have once said that God is our Sun, Light and Burning Ray, but 21st century Presbyterians were uncomfortable with it. In the end, "The Trinity: God's Love Overflowing" was approved by a trickle: 282 for and 212 against, with 7 abstentions...maybe the 7 Presbyterians who still find the Trinity "dark, confusing and without practical significance."

We desire to name God because we desire to know God. We want to understand God as Trinity because we have been made in God's triune image. We need our imaginations and our language broadened. Some of you are reading **The Shack**, by William P. Young and will discuss the book this month. It is the only novel about the Trinity that I have ever read—or even heard of. In it, God appears as an African American woman, a Jewish carpenter in jeans and flannel shirt, and a luminous Asian woman. The book is remarkable in its effort to show what God's Triune life has to do with how you and I live our lives—in matters significant and mundane alike.

So here are a few observations of what it means for God to be triune: God is in relationship, is community...within God's own self, and then spilling over in great love toward the whole world...all of us. Within the three "Persons" there is absolute equality, power is shared and even given away, there is perfect cooperation and unity of purpose. Within God's own self and flowing out toward us in love, God is redeeming and reconciling you and me and every square inch of creation.

Since we are made in God's image, then you and I participate in the Trinity by being in relationship; by sharing community with God and with one another. You and I participate in and reflect the triune life of God when we love so fully that our love flows out toward everyone...the whole world. We practice the Trinitarian life in as much as we live in absolute equality; when we share and even give away power; when we cooperate and have as our purpose, too, redeeming and reconciling love. This high and lofty doctrine of the Trinity, it turns out, has everything to do with how you and I live God's own image in practical ways every day. It is worth all the struggle and creativity in us to try to talk about this triune life of God that is in us. Even if it is true that God is always more than we can name or know.

Amen.

ⁱ Justo Gonzalez, *The history of Christian Thought, Vol. 1.*

ⁱⁱ Only one change to the Creed has occurred since 381, and only in the West. About 100 years later, Christians in Spain added that the Holy Spirit also proceeds from the Father and the Son. This was to deal with a particular heresy in Spain. Around 800, western missionaries discovered that the Eastern church did not have this added wording. They labeled the Greeks heretics, unaware that the Greeks were actually using the original wording! This led to a split between the churches of the west and the east. This information is provided in **Book of Confessions, Study Edition**, p. 6.