

**SLD06.11.06 Trinity Sunday**  
**EPC**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**  
**Romans 8:12-17**

**“Orthodoxy vs. Intimacy”**

So here we arrive once 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 alleluias and get down to the business of living the Christian life, lectionary invites us to pause today to tackle the doctrine of our “three-personed” God.

And I mean “tackle,” too, because, steeped as it is in history, tradition, mystery and projection, tackling the Trinity always strikes me as a little like trying to rush a 350-pound quarterback who’s bigger than I am, been around longer, commands more respect when he walks out on the field, and worse yet, is in a bad mood.

In short, what I feel most strongly in the face of preaching on the doctrine of Trinity, yet again, in the same way, is a distinct sense of defeat before I’ve even begun.

What, after all, could I possibly have to say about a millennia-old doctrine that in its day sparked so much controversy that dramatic schism was threatened until dissenters from the dominant view were branded heretics and thrown out of the church? Who am I to submit an opinion regarding a doctrine from which so much of our latter day God-language and understanding hails – Father, Son and Holy Spirit; Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer – never mind some of our favorite

hymns? What makes me think I'm qualified to question that resounding stamp of approval about the nature of God issued by the hallowed church fathers of the 4<sup>th</sup> century?

Upon noting and naming the sanctity and power of our Triune God, what could there possibly be left to say?

Well, for the orthodox, for those comfortable with, even insistent on, the historical language and conclusions of our 4<sup>th</sup> century church forebears, or for those who have simply done enough personal filtering and translating to make their peace with the historical language of the church, there ain't nothing broke about the Trinity.

But for others of us who feel a certain restlessness with ancient doctrine, or perhaps, with any doctrine at all; for those of us who seek a more immediate sense of meaning and relevancy from our God-talk, who yearn for a sense of personal connection with, and, better yet, an authenticating experience about, what we say we believe, even the sacred doctrine of the Trinity is held accountable for bellying up to the table of today to see whether it can hold its own.

I mean, take away its grandeur, its seniority, and the imprimatur of the historical white boys in charge; take away our reflexive responses of the prescribed truths of childhood, or of Sunday School, or even of seminary, and 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 many of us would confess, "not much."

Noted Professor Brian Wren in an inaugural address a few years ago at Columbia Seminary: 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? “At the day to day level, it is nonfunctional. (While the doctrine may be) central to the meaning of Christian faith, (it remains) marginal to its practice.”<sup>1</sup>

This is not Wren’s position, mind you. To Wren, surface, Trinitarian doctrine is central to the meaning of Christian faith, offering many practical consequences for Christian living to those who scratch its surface. Which Wren, of course, proceeds to do, both thoroughly and eloquently in his address. And for me he is persuasive about the capacity of Trinitarian doctrine to reflect God’s relationship with God’s Self and Creation, especially to the extent that, as a hymn-writer of some renown, Wren had us continually pausing to sing songs of praise to God.

But still, as I thought over the last few weeks about this sermon, about preaching yet again on a doctrine that remains for me somewhat distant and impersonal - spiritually, rather high and dry - I found myself back in the territory of that very large and mildly hostile quarterback. And felt weary.

Then I read the recent article in the AJC’s Faith and Values section about Barbara Brown Taylor’s new book called *Leaving Church*. Barbara Brown Taylor, in case you don’t know, is a well-known Episcopal priest who’s been

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Wren, Inaugural Address at Columbia Theological Seminary, March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2001, Decatur, Ga. p.2.

lauded for some time for her excellence in preaching. In fact, she's been named among the 12 most effective preachers in the English language.

A few years back, however, Taylor left parish ministry, because, as she describes it, "her role and soul were eating each other alive" – a sentiment with which I, and perhaps some of you, can identify from time to time. The title of Brown's new book sounds dangerous, and enticing. *Leaving Church*. What can it mean that a world-renown preacher writes a book called Leaving Church? I can't wait to read it. Perhaps a remark Taylor made in the article gives a hint of her motivation – she says that her Christian faith is "more relational than doctrinal."<sup>2</sup> That she, like many Christians, like many people in this congregation, is, "hungry for new ways to worship and experience God."

When I get a chance to read the book, I'll know more. But its title, Taylor's remarks, and my esteem for her all somehow helped me dare to go at the Trinity differently this morning. My Christian faith, like Taylor's, like many of yours, is more relational than doctrinal, too. What if I gave myself permission to leave behind whatever about the Trinity seems baffling, outdated, irrelevant and non-relational. What would happen then? Would anything be left? I wasn't sure. Feeling slightly wicked and adventuresome, I thought I'd give it a try.

But before we toss the doctrine out, let's remember together 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, the Emperor Constantine won control of the Roman Empire in the Battle of Milvian

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<sup>2</sup> Atlanta Journal and Constitution, "Faith and Values, June 3, 2006.

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.’”<sup>3</sup>

But what Constantine soon discovered was that the churches in Rome and Constantinople were, in fact, not one church at all, but rather, various communions much fractured by theological disputes about the nature of Christ. People wondered, for example, if Jesus were the Son of God, how could he be God, too? Or, for that matter, if Jesus *were* fully God, how could he be *human* at the same time?

Or say Jesus were somehow human and divine at the same time, does that mean that when Jesus died on the cross, God died as well? 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. Or maybe Jesus weren't really *human* at all but only took on a human disguise the way Greek gods were forever doing. You get the idea. In those 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 also because various understandings of Jesus and God and the Holy Spirit determined things like how many Gods we were talking about here, or, if only One, the relative authority of its various members.

Well, Constantine called a couple of councils in Nicaea during which what the church fathers finally settled on for the various aspects of God was the Greek

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<sup>3</sup> The Book of Confessions, PC(USA), The Office of the General Assembly, Louisville, Ky., 1999. p.2.

word “prosopon” which means “face” or “countenance” or “expression.” What they concluded was that there is One God and three expressions, or faces, of God, each one fully, equally, simultaneously and eternally participating in the others. Three persons, one substance, one divine reality. The Trinity.

What of that really has to do with us today? How much of that whole 4<sup>th</sup> century process of the determination of orthodoxy, (that is, who won and who lost) was really about consolidating the power and control of the hierarchy of the church? Was there anything beyond the question of right belief and who got to determine it, beyond personal or institutional power, or orthodoxy for orthodoxy’s sake, that those church fathers were trying to protect?

I think so. Besides establishing once and for all (though not really) who was going to be in charge, in defending their interpretation of scripture’s witness to Jesus Christ and the inscrutable Oneness of God, I believe the church fathers were trying to protect the intimacy of relationship both among the three persons of our Trinitarian God, and between God and humanity.

Consider what it means to assert that the Creator and the first Created One are one, that they coexist as a unit, that they are direct extensions of one another. “I and the Father are One” John 10:30; “The Father is in me and I am in the Father” John 10:38; “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” John 14:9

The closest we get to this in healthy human experience is the profound existential bond between a mother and a newborn. But even that developmental moment doesn’t capture the eternal and complete union between God the Father

and God the Son those early worthies were trying to express. I say “trying” because when it comes to God, words, explanations, metaphors, never suffice. Theologies are never absolute, invariably, over time, revealing their insufficiency. Which is why “one way God deals with the limited ways we have of relating to God is by reducing our concepts of God to silence.”<sup>4</sup>

But when a word must be spoken, when a community discerns a different understanding of God’s power and love, and the purpose of that word is the building up of God’s beloved community, then, well, we who speak the Word do the best we can. And the best the 4<sup>th</sup> century church fathers could do with what they viewed as the diverse misunderstandings about the nature of Jesus, Jesus’ relationship with God, and God’s relationship with us comes to us today as the doctrine of the Trinity - that God and Jesus are One, and that the essence of that “oneness” is present in life, in our lives, in every life, through the agency of the Holy Spirit.

Yes, it’s true that the 4<sup>th</sup> century white guys in charge were fussing among themselves largely about who had the most power to describe the Indescribable, which, in retrospect, may seem a little silly. And it’s true, too, at least for me, that 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

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Keating, Invitation to Love, The Continuum Publishing Company, New York, NY, 1999. p.87.

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.