

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by the Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. on Trinity Sunday, May 18, 2008.

Matthew 28:16-20

I want to call our attention to the hymn verse we just sang, “Holy Father, holy Son, Holy Spirit Three we name thee, while in essence only One, undivided God we claim thee; then, adoring, bend the knee and confess the mystery.” These lyrics poetically and simply summarize the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. Three distinct persons in One undivided, unified God. Today is Trinity Sunday, one of the seven principal feasts of the Church calendar. Today we praise and adore this triune God, and, as the hymn suggests, “confess the mystery.” It is Trinity Sunday, but I have to admit that compared to the other principal feasts: Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, All Saints, Christmas, and Epiphany, Trinity Sunday feels a little strange. The other feasts celebrate people and events. Trinity Sunday celebrates a mystery. How do you celebrate a mystery? 3 persons in One God. It doesn't make a whole lot of sense...so let's have a party! If Hallmark were to market a greeting card for Trinity Sunday the inside would have to be blank! The other question is why celebrate a mystery? We celebrate this mystery because in the divine dance of the Trinity, we have a picture of what it means to be in communion. In the divine family of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit we are given the hope that we can be incorporated into that family. The mystery of the Trinity is that the persons of God move toward one other in such a way that we, the people of God, are also drawn together in One family, one holy communion.

We celebrate the mystery also because the mystery shapes who we are as baptized members of the Church. This morning we heard the final words of Matthew's Gospel, what is often known as the “Great Commission” in which Jesus exhorts the 11 remaining disciples to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. In the Hebrew tradition, when you act in someone's name, that name defines you and fundamentally shapes you. So when Jesus says to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, he is saying that being disciple, being a baptized member of the body means to be defined by the Trinity. We call ourselves Christians because we follow the path of Jesus Christ, but we are also Trinitarians, fundamentally shaped and formed by God the three in One. And so what does it mean to be defined by the Trinity?

I do not often quote theologians when I preach, but since we are wading into the muddy and mystery waters of the Trinity, it does not hurt to have a little help! Roman Catholic theologian, Catherine LaCugna wrote a book entitled God For Us. And in the book she makes the point that God is essentially FOR us, God, the Holy Trinity reaches out to us. Her main point is that “the doctrine of the Trinity, when properly understood, is the affirmation of God's intimate communion with us through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.” Intimate communion with us. Intimate communion. That is a powerful concept: God in communion with us. God with us and for us. That is something to celebrate. God loves us closely in a way that is deeply connected through Christ in the Holy Spirit. And our response to that close love of God is to then reach out and love each other and in doing so, reach back to God. What a comforting and life giving thought. LaCugna says that this is how the early church fathers and mothers, the authors of the creeds, understood the Trinity. God for us.

Later though, the church thought of the Trinity differently. In the middle ages, scholars were trying to apply the rules of logic and philosophy to our thinking about God. They wanted God to make sense. In order to make the Trinity work logically, in order to be able to say that God was three and yet One, Christian thinkers put the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit into an isolated realm far away from ours where they could exist in perfect harmony. They understood The triune God as existing completely apart from creation. God the Father, God the creator might intervene in creation from time to time, sending forth the Son and the Holy Spirit, but in essence God was separate from creation. It's like God was on another planet sending out parts of God's self like space ships on a mission. And this was probably a great comfort during that time, because the Middle Ages were rough! The middle ages in Europe were

years of famines and plagues and wars. Life was not pleasant, and the thought that God the Holy Trinity was existing in some perfect realm untouched by all that nastiness was a nice thought. At least the Trinity made sense. At least somewhere in the universe there was a place of purity and harmony. That was something to celebrate. And how wonderful that God would reach out from God's perfect heavenly realm from time to time to touch our lives. The problem with this concept of God as "out there" was that the church also began to see itself as separate and apart from the world. Just as the Trinity could mysteriously exist as three and yet One, the church could mysteriously exist as in the world yet not of the world. The church strove to become a perfect place on the imperfect earth. And as a consequence, the church became more isolated, more authoritarian, more insistent that it be able to assert its will on the world without having to be touched by the world. The church thought it could be pure just as the Trinity was pure. Of course, this was impossible, because the church is not God. The church is the hands and feet of Christ, but it is still a human institution. As the Church sought to impose its will, it began to lose touch with the people. It became less compassionate. As the Church tried to live into its vision of the distant and detached Trinity, it made some pretty big messes and hurt a lot of people.

So the way we think about the Trinity is important. The way we think about the Trinity affects the way we think about the church. The way we think about the Trinity affects the way we think about ourselves. If we think of God as "out there," as far off and distant, existing in some perfect realm removed from us, then it became easy to think of ourselves in the same way. If we are baptized in the name of a detached God, we might think of ourselves and our fellowship as being unrelated to the world around us. We might be tempted to see ourselves as isolated and alone.

In the book I was talking about, God For Us, Catherine LaCugna says that God needs to be understood most fundamentally in terms of personhood. God is three persons, and persons are by nature about relationship. God is not "out there." God is right here in relationship with us. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have always been swirling about us, drawing us into their sacred and sanctifying dance. Through Christ and in the Holy Spirit we experience that intimate communion, closeness with God.

So when Jesus commissions the disciples to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, he is telling them to initiate all persons into a communion, the communion of the Trinity. We might call it a family because the relationships are deep and close. God is not out there. God is right here.

Jesus commissioned his disciples. Jesus is still commissioning us, and it is the Trinity that empowers us to follow Christ's command. It is a Trinity whose persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are in perfect relationship with each other that forms us into a more perfect community of brothers and sisters in Christ. It is a Trinity that makes us a family. We are family, and we can bring others into our family because God is making us part of God's family, the Father and Mother Creator, the Son and Savior, and the Spirit and Sanctifier. Now that is a mystery worth celebrating!

Like our medieval forebears we celebrate the order of the Trinity in a chaotic world. But unlike our forebears we celebrate the Trinity not as far away but as near. We celebrate the mystery of the Trinity working amidst the death and destruction of a cyclone in Myanmar and an earthquake in China. We celebrate the Trinity working as we mourn the loss of beloved sisters and brothers. I need to stop right here and just acknowledge that we lost our sister Mary Bhansingh this past week. She died on Tuesday and we celebrated her life here on Friday. And for all of us who knew Mary, we know that she would be telling us to celebrate the mystery. Celebrate the mystery even in the midst of disease and disaster and death. She would be the first to tell us that God is not far away, but God is near. The persons of the Trinity are in our midst, swirling and dancing about us, making the whole creation new, even as it seems to be falling apart. We celebrate the mystery of the Trinity, that God is not far off in some heavenly realm, but that God draws near to us in our trials, draws near to us in the person of Christ who suffered trials with us and gave us the Holy Spirit so that we might never be alone. The persons of the Trinity are in our midst making us one even as we are many, unifying us even in our diversity. We confess and we celebrate that we are shaped, formed, molded by this mystery Trinity. Come family. Come and confess

the mystery. Come and confess the triune God who loves us and will never let us alone. Let us stand and affirm our Trinitarian faith as we say together the mysterious words of the Nicene Creed...