

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by The Rev. Dr. Stuart Hoke on Sunday, June 19, 2011.

(Genesis 1:1-2:4a; II Corinthians 13:11-13; Matthew 28:16-20)

Today is Trinity Sunday. It's also referred to as the Solemnity of the Most Blessed and Holy Trinity. It is the only day in our church's vast calendar which commemorates and gives thanks for a teaching of the church, a doctrine. Not a person, not an event, but a dogmatic fundamental on which Christians have built an entire system of theology. We believe in one God. We say that every single Sunday in the church as a foundation stone of the faith, the words of the Nicene Creed, and then we turn right around and spell out that unity in terms of Trinity, God who makes God's self known as Father, as Son, as Holy Spirit. Or as sometimes we hear in modern theological speak, as Creator, as Redeemer, as Sanctifier.

As a devotee of Facebook, you would not believe the flurry of activity among some of my Internet Facebook clergy friends who write this week about tearing their hair out on what to preach this particular Sunday and how to preach it. The doctrine of the Trinity is so precise a teaching of the church within such a carefully constructed framework and syntax that one slip of the tongue might lead to heresy, and then it's Katy bar the door and before you know it, it might be another round of the inquisition. We sometimes walk on theological eggshells as we approach this Sunday. No wonder rectors are always getting their curates to preach on Trinity Sunday. And if the curate happens to be away, rectors have been known to have a guest come in to do the pulpit honors.

Our two New Testament readings this morning give us Biblical grounding for the teaching on the Trinity, both a selection from St. Paul's letter to the Romans and the very end note, the last verse of St. Matthew's Gospel. They articulate our Christian understanding of one God who manifests as three persons: Father, Son, Holy Ghost. The Gospel of Matthew is really interesting. It's worth a study in itself. It was written long before the church ever finally articulated a doctrine of the Trinity. That came in perhaps the third or even the fourth century, and yet what the authors of the doctrine did was to cut and paste. It's the original cut and paste, and to go back and apply it to the Gospel of Matthew leading us to believe that it had been there all the time so that Jesus says -- Jesus has a full understanding, we're thought to believe, "Go ye into all the world and baptize in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit."

A much more contemporaneous expression of the Trinity comes from St. Paul's words perhaps written in the fifties or maybe the sixties. This had to do with people's experience of God and St. Paul uses that phrase that has become beloved in the Episcopal Church, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and forevermore." "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ," that's something that anyone who hangs around a place like this has experienced at times. The nurture, the love, the forgiveness, the power of God given to us when we least expect it, desperately need it and are no more worthy of it than is the man in the moon.

"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God," the love of God, agapeic love, the love that God gives, the love that never counts the cost, the love that has no strings attached, the love that St. Paul says is patient and kind, never boastful or rude, love that never struts, love that never says "me first, me first," the love of God and then the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Oh, we all know something about that. That aspect of God that breathes and prays within us when we don't have the words to say or even the thoughts to think or even the sense to come in out of the rain. And it does so in those sighs and groans that are way to deep for words.

Thirty-two years ago I preached for the first time at the ordination of two priests, and it was in one of our great southern cathedrals in a diocese where I was serving at the time. I have no idea what I said on the occasion, and I hardly remember the ordinants, but I do recall that once the service was over I was on vacation and headed for Gulf Shores in Mississippi. I was going to be outside the pulpit on Trinity Sunday for sure. I had a curate and I let him do that. We stopped that first Saturday night in the city of Jackson, and we stayed in a downtown Holiday Inn that sat right next to the Episcopal Cathedral of St. Andrew.

Like most vacationing clergy, at least at that time in my life, I was front and center at the church's eight o'clock service the next morning eager to hear what the big girls and the big boys did in the big church, particularly on Trinity Sunday. And on that occasion and within that beautiful cathedral space, I heard what I do believe was the worst sermon ever preached in the history of Christendom. Well, I should have known that the Dean would not be in the pulpit. It was Trinity Sunday. As they say these days, "Hello!" The order of service noted that he had gone on vacation, of course, and that the brand, spanking new curate, one who had been ordained right the day before, would be mounting the pulpit in his very first foray into the vagaries of homiletics -- what words -- into the world of preaching.

At the shortened version of the homily designed for the eight o'clock crowd, the befuddled young man, the new curate, stood at the chancel crossing, right there, and attempted an extemporaneous explication on the meaning of the Trinity. There's something oxymoronic about that -- an extemporaneous explication on the meaning of the Trinity? He stuttered, he murmured, he stammered, he misquoted the Athanasian Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed, and he so confused himself with philosophical verbiage that at one point he actually pivoted 360 degrees. He went like this, and he gave brand new meaning to the term liturgical dance. My family and I were on the front row. We suffered a huge co-dependent attack on his behalf, and we prayed that the floor would open up and swallow him, lest he got himself into more trouble. He was prattling on and on about how there are not three eternal, but one eternal, as also there are not three un-created nor three infinities, but one un-created and one infinite. And the congregation looked at him with that glazed look that so often befalls those who go to an eight o'clock service.

Then he went to pep things up by saying that the word "person" was not really adequate for translating the Greek hypostasis. Well, they really got glazed at that. As you can imagine, the several golfers in the congregation were getting antsy. Ironically, the preacher's concluding remarks were telling, and they were very, very effective, and they were not even verbal. It was sheer genius. He didn't even know he was doing it. Looking stricken after his pivot, the preacher contorted his face, he furrowed his brow, he shrugged his shoulders and he lifted his

hands into what was the "Why was I ever ordained?" position. It was a case of true befuddlement before the Almighty. Bewilderment in attempting to explain that which is inexplicable as we speak about the doctrine of the Trinity. How appropriate it would be to be like this. Almost a perfect response to a human attempt to grasp, to apprehend, to comprehend, to understand God.

I think of St. Augustine's oft quoted piece, "God is not what you imagine or what you think you understand. If you understand, you have failed." Suffice it to say this is a teaching designed to blow your mind, to stretch your imagination, to grab your very heart. It reveals that God that can only be seen, can only be felt, can only be experienced as spiritual experience whose mystery inspires awe and cannot be understood with the gift of reason or even logic.

The blessed Trinity reminds us in no uncertain terms that God is so much greater than our minds could ever understand, than our hearts can hold, than our spirits can fathom. I have a book on my bookshelf that has been there for years. Why I don't get rid of it, I don't know. I've long forgotten what's inside it, but the title is arresting, and it always gets my attention every time I spot it. The book is J.B. Phillips, "Your God is Too Small." And I'm just sure that there's a chapter within it that says, "And you, Stuart Hoke, are way, way too big for your spiritual britches. Grow your God and let God be God and you go about being you. Put the scheme of things in right perspective. Right size it, for God's sakes."

In like fashion, I have a t-shirt that has been in the back of a chest drawer as long as J.B. Phillips has been on the bookshelf. The t-shirt reads, "There is a God, and I'm not it." I should wear that on Sunday mornings, especially on Trinity Sunday to remind myself and you that God is mother and father of us all; that I'm merely the child. That God is the creator; that I am the created. That God is the principal; that I am but the agent. That God is energy; and me, only a channel.

As one twentieth century sage put it, when I take such a theological position, remarkable things begin to happen. I'm no longer supersizing myself. I've put things into right perspective. I've become right headed and right hearted. The Holy Trinity makes us realize one more time that there is a power greater than me and you, doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves, helping us to remember one more time that God is doing for us, for me and you, better things than we can ever ask or imagine. Realizing that we were put on this earth as a means to God's ends and not as an end in itself. Realizing that God is in essence community and not individuality. God is three, not just one. So that it is all about me and you when we speak of God. That's the essence of our life together. If I had wanted to insert elements of social justice into this sermon on this 19th day of June, known in my part of the south as Juneteenth, this would be a great place to do it. Emancipation from slavery, whatever kind of slavery there is that oppresses the human spirit, is a call for discipleship for anyone binding unto herself or himself the strong name of the Trinity.

So then, three aspects of one God all of whom are co-equal, co-eternal, con-substantial, but each with a facet, an aspect, a personality unique unto itself. That is the bedrock of Christian belief. That's the cornerstone, that is the sine qua non of Christian theology, and it's a mystery from beginning to end. If you think you understand it, if you can think you can wrap your head or your heart around it, St. Augustine and I will suggest that you don't. But if you have a sense of

awe and reverence in its presence, if you can pivot 360 degrees in the face of the divine majesty, then you are truly whistling Dixie.

Let me close with Richard Rohr's statement. I read his meditations every morning. He's a Roman Catholic Franciscan priest who writes beautiful things, a great start for the morning. And wouldn't you know it, today he didn't write anything. He inserted a poem. It says this, "God, for us, we call you Father. God, alongside us, we call you Jesus. God, within us, we call you Holy Spirit. You are the eternal mystery that enables and folds and enlivens all things, even us and even me." In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.