

“GOD IN THREE PERSONS”

a sermon on Genesis 1:1–2:4a, 2 Corinthians 13:11-13, Matthew 28:16-20
for Trinity Sunday
June 11, 2017 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller
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On the Church Calendar, the first Sunday after Pentecost is called "Trinity Sunday." I don't know whether you are aware of it or not, but it took the Christian Church about *300 years* to reach a consensus on the notion that God really is "One God, in three persons." Part of the problem was that although God the Father, Jesus Christ God's only Son, and the Holy Spirit are all thoroughly Biblical concepts, the word "*Trinity*" actually never occurs in Scripture, and isn't ever fleshed out in the New Testament as a theological proposition. A good many Biblical scholars have always held that even the passages like our Gospel lesson which contain a clear statement of the "Trinitarian formula" (in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit) are essentially later "reflections" of the Christian community *interpreting* the words of Jesus and the Apostles.

Looking back, Christian scholars find the building blocks of "Trinitarian language" going all the way back to the opening verses of Scripture – which is why Genesis 1 is a Lectionary text for this Sunday. In the creation narratives, God not only has "creative" power and imagination, God also *speaks*, has "a Word," and "breathes," has *breath* ("breath," in both Hebrew and Greek being the same word as both "wind" and "spirit").

So the building blocks are certainly there – neatly contained, as a matter of fact, in exactly the first *three verses* of Scripture:

- verse one (the Father Almighty, "maker of heaven and earth"), "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth;
- verse two, "the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a "wind from God" [that is, God's "Ruach" – God's wind, God's breath, God's *Spirit*] swept over the face of the waters; and
- verse three, quoting first the Gospel of John, "in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word *was God*, Genesis 1: 3 says, "Then God *said*, "Let there be light"; and there was light.

That said, it actually wasn't until the Council of Nicaea in the year 325 that the doctrine of the Trinity was formally established and declared to be the

Church's official teaching. And to this day, there remain church bodies who certainly consider themselves "Christians," but who don't profess belief in the doctrine.

Furthermore, it is not uncommon to hear even the most learned of Christian theologians get "bogged down" in their own words trying to describe what the doctrine means. They end up talking about "essences," and "substances," and it gets very deep and heady.

So in the first place, if you don't think you have a very firm "grasp" of what it means to serve a "Triune God," don't worry. You have plenty of company!

I don't mean to imply that the doctrine of the Trinity is in any way unimportant. It is *exceedingly* important – important enough to certain leaders in the early Church that they allowed themselves to be banished, and even in some cases executed, rather than profess it. And important enough to others for them to insist that such consequences be imposed.

But like so many other theological questions, the real problem is simply that our minds are too limited, and our words too few, to fully understand, let alone express, the full meaning of such a notion – even though, of course, some very great minds have taken their best shot at it, and written *volumes* on the subject.

It was the theologian Tertullian - writing in the very early 200's – who gave us the first really great analogy of how God is both One and Three, stating that, "when a ray is projected from the sun, it is a portion of the whole sun; but the sun will be in the ray because it is a ray of the sun; the substance is not separated but extended. So from spirit comes spirit, and God from God, as light is kindled from light...This ray of God...glided down into a virgin, in her womb was fashioned as flesh, and was born as man mixed with God. The flesh was built up by the spirit, was nourished, grew up, spoke, taught, worked, and was Christ."

And then, not much later, another great theologian, Origen, came up with the idea of "Personae," or "persons" of the godhead, a concept taken from Greek theatre, where a "personae" was a particular character that an actor would "become" in a play. At times, since their costumes were often very elaborate, fully covering an individual, including their face, the same actor might have several "personae" in the same play. The same *being*, in three *persons*.

But understand that those are simply analogies, and all analogies finally fall short. John Calvin, in discussing the doctrine of the Trinity noted "that the ancients, who otherwise speak very reverently concerning these matters, agree

neither among themselves nor even at all times individually *with* themselves" (emphasis added). And he advises his readers "to be not such a stickler as to battle doggedly over mere words;" that is, Calvin too recognized that human words and ideas are limited, and are finally inadequate.

Which is why, in the final analysis, the Trinity is probably better *sung*, or *prayed*, or *recited*, than *debated* or *argued*. The "mystery of the Holy Trinity" is the indescribable connection between the *power*, and the *eternity*, and the *otherness* of God, on the one hand, and the presence, and tenderness, grace, and *guidance* of God on the other. And it is more about *experiencing*, than *understanding*. The doctrine of the Trinity is that there is One God, but there are three distinguishable ways that we *experience* the One God.

But for all the points I just listed about the theological arguments and deep, technical definitions, a part of me, I must admit, rather *dreads* the arrival of this Sunday each year, when I usually feel *obligated* to offer my best *explanation* of it, with the full knowledge that the doctrine, finally, simply *cannot* be explained.

The fact is, while the Trinity is a theological doctrine, it is *also* – maybe even *supremely* – liturgy, and devotion. We Christians *do* sing, and pray, and recite the doctrine a regular basis (as in, *every* single time we gather together for worship). Service elements like the "Gloria Patri" and the "Doxology" are Trinitarian recitations and ascriptions. So are most Affirmations of Faith – including the Apostles' and the Nicene Creeds.

On Sundays like today, when the Holy Trinity is our particular focus, references are easily worked into almost every other element of the service from long established and beloved texts. Some are more obvious than others. But, for example, the simple reference in the Prayer of Confession this morning to the "Grace, Love, and Communion" of God is in fact an allusion to the more complete quotation from Paul's letter to the Corinthians that was part of this morning's Epistle Lesson: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all" – words that are also often used as a benediction in worship services.

And then of course, on this "Trinity Sunday," we are also singing *hymns* that focus on the Trinity. All three of our hymns this morning have a "Trinitarian theme." And the fact is, *many* of the hymns in our hymnal at least conclude – as do *all three* of this morning's hymns – with a final stanza that "ascribes glory" to God

using some variation of the Trinitarian formula. That has been a common practice in hymn writing for centuries.

All of which, I repeat, is to suggest that the “mystery” of the doctrine of the Trinity is something to be *experienced* more than *understood*. And the way to experience it is to *engage* it in worship. In our acts of approaching the throne of God, *dealing* with who we are — both as individuals, and collectively as a *people* — and of *encountering* and *responding* to God’s Word, we will gain about as much *understanding* of God’s existence “in three persons” as in any other way.

As we ponder the vastness of the universe, and God’s providential care and keeping, we are moved to gratitude for the gift of life, and made aware of God’s awesome power. In coming to terms with our shortcomings and *hearing* God’s Word of Grace, we come to an awareness and appreciation for God the Son’s Sacrifice for us. In moments of both silence and grandeur, when we sense God’s “presence” in our midst, we experience God’s Spirit in us, and around us.

Consider our opening hymn. Its words are probably as familiar to you as the words of any hymn in the hymnal, at least if you were raised in the Presbyterian Church. It could be considered the “quintessential” Presbyterian hymn (even if it *was* composed by an Anglican bishop!).

“Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty! Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee; Holy, Holy, Holy! merciful and mighty! *God in Three Persons, blessed Trinity!*”

Those words both beautifully, and also *majestically* express both the “otherness” of the God – seated on the throne, surrounded by the heavenly host – as well as the *nearness*, and *mercy* of God – Who, “though the darkness hide Thee,” and “the eye of sinfulness Thy glory may not see,” nonetheless is “merciful *and* mighty” (emphasis added).

So on this Trinity Sunday (as well as, for that matter, whenever we gather for worship), I invite you to simply *experience* God in God’s “three persons,” and not get bogged down in what Calvin called “mere words.” The fact is, we worship the Triune God because that is how we *experience* God. Our theological words are simply our limited, imperfect, human attempts to put our experience into words.

And so to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be all praise and glory, now and forever. Amen.