

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by Rev. Gail L. Miller, Pastor

June 7, 2009 Trinity Sunday

Isaiah 6:1-8

Romans 8:12-17

The Trinity: Not for Understanding

Remember the Abbot and Costello skit "Who's on First?" Well, someone wrote a similar skit on the subject of the Trinity: (Pastor Charles Woodward)

A: When you come to church you need to know the key players . . . you know, the ones who are worthy of honor and praise.

B: Honor and praise huh? Well who are they?

A: O.K., now listen closely. There is one God.

B: One God. That seems easy enough. What do you call this one God?

A: This one God is called, "God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit."

B: Now wait just a minute. You told me that there is only one God.

A: That's right!

B: So which is it?

A: So which is what?

B: Which name do you use for this one God?

A: The name I gave you.

B: But you gave me three names.

A: That's right.

B: What's right?

A: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

B: So you have three Gods?

A: No, one God.

B: So which is it?

A: Which is what?

B: Father, Son or Holy Spirit?

A: Yes!

B: Yes to what?

A: That's God's name.

B: Which God?

A: Our one God.

B: Why did you give three names?

A: Because they aren't the same.

B: But you just told me there is one God. So which is it?

A: Which is what?

B: Which name is the name of your God?

A: I told you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit

B: But that is three.

A: Yes, but it's only one.

Trinity Sunday is a special Sunday in the church year; it has been celebrated since 1334 when Pope John XXII fixed it as the Sunday after Pentecost. It is a Sunday which is not tied to any special event or rituals. Rather it is a day when we remember just God himself, it is a day to focus our hearts and minds on him. It is a bit like a birthday when all we do is celebrate a particular person and their presence with us.

The Doctrine is (simply stated!):

1. God eternally exists as three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
2. Each person is fully God
3. There is one God.

The Bible never uses the word Trinity, yet, by implication, it is stated many times. The early Christians soon discovered that they simply could not speak of God without speaking of the three ways in which God had revealed himself to them. This does not mean that there are three Gods. It means that there is one God who has shown himself in three ways: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The story of Jesus baptism is a time when all three persons of the Trinity are present at the same time:

And when Jesus was baptised, he went up immediately from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him; and lo, a voice from heaven saying, 'This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased'. (Matt. 3:16-17)

Father, Son and Holy Spirit all in one episode!

Each of the persons is distinct from the other, and at the same time related in essence. The diagram in the announcements is a good way to show how the three are related – the same yet different. (12th C.)

The Father is not the same person as the Son who is not the same person as the Holy Spirit who is not the same person as the Father. Each is divine, yet there are not three gods, but one God.

Included in the doctrine of the Trinity is a strict monotheism which is the teaching that there exists in all the universe a single being known as God who is self-existent and unchangeable (Isaiah 43:10; 44:6, 8).

All of the clever illustrations (Clover leaf, the sun as heat, light and energy, water as a solid, liquid and steam etc.) which we have heard since Sunday School, they all fall short of explaining how logically God can be three and yet one.

Really, the most accurate explanation of the Trinity can be given in one word: mystery. It is a mystery of our faith.

Because the Trinity does not actually attempt to explain God, it only explains what we know about God, that which he has revealed to us. Think of it this way – imagine that God is an iceberg. To describe the tip of the iceberg above the water is not to describe the entire iceberg. Similarly, we affirm the Trinity, not as an explanation of God, but simply as a way of describing what we currently know about God.

In 1 Corinthians Chapter 13 it says:

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. ... Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Notice...knowledge will pass away. Human knowledge will be revealed to be a lot less important than we might care to believe. However, there are three things which are important, faith, hope and love. I personally find great relief in not having to understand – much of the time I find it easier to believe than to understand!

Remember also, that the disciples found themselves quite confused much of the time as well – even after the resurrection, when he returned as he said he would. They were still confused! And when you think about it, there is a lot about Jesus which is confusing – how he can be God and man at the same time, how he can die and come back to life, how he can have a body which eats fish and passes through walls. They – the disciples – were understandably confused.

I wonder if one of the reasons Jesus gave the disciples the Last Supper, what is now the Sacrament of Holy Communion, is because he knew how difficult it would be for them after he was gone and how their faith would need to be nurtured and sustained.

The good news is that the whole point of a mystery is that we do not understand it. A mystery is not to be understood with the mind, but rather embraced with the heart.

We need faith not facts.

When Jesus speaks of ‘going out to make disciples,’ he is not speaking of quick fix conversions, he is encouraging the disciples to go and nurture others into the experience of discipleship.

When we think about God we are not supposed to pretend that we know everything. We are supposed to proclaim with the hymn ‘O Lord my God when I in awesome wonder...’

The Trinity is a way of saying that God is much bigger and more complicated than we will ever know.... you can’t put him in your pocket.

The Trinity is also an example of unity and diversity which is an important aspect of the Christian life. This came up a couple weeks ago, in our Gospel reading was Jesus praying for his disciples – that they would be one, just as he and the Father are one.

Just as orchestras rely upon different instruments playing different parts to perform a single piece, so in the church we each play our part as the one body of Christ. That we are all part of one body – the church – in no way makes us all the same.

This is why the Trinity is so helpful as we make our way in the world as the church. We have a unity which defines us – we are one in Christ – which holds us together, despite our differences.

The Trinity is a model for our relationships here.

Like in the Lord’s Prayer when we pray, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Here's how the Archbishop of Canterbury puts it:

Knowing the Trinity is being involved in this circling movement:

*Drawn by the Son towards the Father,
drawn into the Father's breathing out of the Spirit
so that the Sons' life may be again made real in the world.*

It is where contemplation and action become inseparable.

(Rowan Williams, *The Dwelling of the Light: Praying with Icons of Christ*)

As we contemplate the divine love within the Trinity, may God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit inspire us to love and actions that God's will would be done in us as it is in heaven.

Amen.