

The Trinity as Clue to Community¹

Matthew 28: 18-20

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May 18, 2008

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Today on Trinity Sunday I am going to speak of the doctrine of the Trinity. I begin by quoting Christian scholar Dorothy Sayers, "The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, the Spirit incomprehensible, and the whole darned thing incomprehensible!" As incomprehensible as it is, we proceed, nonetheless.

Every Tuesday morning Meg Richardson holds chapel for the preschoolers from our Child Development Center. Every Tuesday there is something new. Almost every Tuesday there is some memorable theological comment made by one of the very smallest ones. Meg often shares these with me. Meg has given me permission to pass one on to you, as together we consider the Trinity.

Meg was teaching the children to sing the Doxology over the course of several weeks. About the third week they were singing it together, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow, Praise Father Son and Holy Ghost," three-year-old Dylan pipes up with "But what about the mother?" We sing about the daddy and the son, but what about the mother?

Even in his little three-year-old mind, Dylan had an instinctive sense about the Trinity, the sense that the Trinity is a family, that the Trinity somehow is clue to a community beyond ourselves. And, I would add, Dylan is a feminist theologian. Because he recognizes the Trinity might be incomplete without some representation of the feminine face of God. But that's another sermon for another day.

In our Presbyterian and Reformed tradition, we tend to shy away from pictures of God. But in the Christian church, and particularly the

¹ Title borrowed from an article of the same name by David H. C. Read, appearing in The Living Pulpit, 1999.

Eastern Christian church, pictures and icons representing God, Christ, and the saints are very important to the worship experience and to the experience of the holy. We saw a large number of icons on our trip to the Holy Land because the major Eastern Christian churches, the Greek Orthodox and the Coptic and the Syrian---all have churches in the Holy Land.

There is a very famous icon believed to represent the Trinity, called Rublev's icon. It was painted by the Russian monk Andrew Rublev in the fifteenth century. There was a large reproduction of it in the stairwell at the hotel where we stayed in Jerusalem. Every time I ran up and down those stairs it brought the Trinity to mind, and (for reasons I will soon explain), it brought you to mind as well.

The icon may not be what you first think of when you think about God. It is a picture of three feminine-looking figures seated at table, with a large goblet set on the table. One could say these are men with long hair, but honestly, look at them! They look very feminine. What is striking about the picture is not the gender, but the equality of the figures. They all appear to be of the same age. They have the same type of dress, the same posture.

Three sides of the table are occupied but the fourth side is empty. It is empty and inviting, and I would like to suggest it is empty because God invites us to this table and to the communal relationship which is at its very heart Trinitarian and at its very core, God.

You may be surprised to remember that the word Trinity does not appear anywhere in the Bible. There are probably less than twenty passages in all of scripture which even indirectly refer to the Trinity. We heard three today, one from the very beginning of the Bible, one from the gospel of John, and one from the words of Jesus in the Great Commission. The phrase that does occur a few times in Scripture "the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit" is known as the 'Trinitarian formula.'

The concept of the Trinity was developed by the early church over the course of many centuries. It was the product of reflection on the gospel message, and it was the result of many terrific theological arguments. The passion and the power plays which surrounded these arguments and councils was not unlike the passion and power plays surrounding our current presidential race. It was that important! The church propounded the doctrine of the Trinity after many fierce and fervent debates. These debates happened at least in part to clarify and understand the nature of who Jesus Christ was and is.

I cannot resist the opportunity for a very brief history lesson. It is a story of power, politics, and passion that is hard for us to believe today, tepid as we are about matters of faith.

The basic contours of the doctrine of the Trinity emerged first in the liturgy, from the crucible of 250 years of oppression. We have to remember that until the 4th century after the conversion of the emperor Constantine, Christianity was an illegal religion. Two camps of thought emerged and a major conflict about the nature of God centered upon the arguments of two theologians, Arius and Athanasius.

Arius claimed that Christ was not co-eternal with God; that there was a time when Christ did not exist.

Athanasius argued that Christ was of the same substance as the Father, begotten before the world began.

Constantine, sensing a major split in Christianity would threaten his empire, convened a universal council of the church to end the controversy. In June 325 Constantine opened the council of Nicaea in Asia Minor (present day Turkey) with 300 bishops, most of whom were from the East. The Council adopted what we know as the Nicæan Creed, familiar to us:

“We believe in one God, Father, all-sovereign, maker of all things seen and unseen, and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of the same substance with the Father, through whom all things came into existence. . .and in one Holy Spirit.”

Arguments and disagreements continued and the Council of Constantinople was called in 381 by Emperor Theodosius to end the unrest. The Creed became the sole baptismal confession in Eastern Churches. It was not until the end of the fourth century that Roman emperors (and the Western church) finally came to support the position of Nicaea.

There are many misunderstandings about the doctrine of the Trinity. It is NOT about hierarchy. It is NOT a picture the “three masks” of God. It is NOT a doctrine that honors three distinct gods. It is NOT emphasizing God the Father, Jesus Christ, or the Holy Spirit to the exclusion of the other two. And it is not some pie-in-the-sky esoteric concept that has no meaning for us in our Christian walk. To the contrary. The Trinity **matters**.

The Trinity matters because the Trinity is one of our core beliefs. We are the only major world religion which holds this view of God, in contrast to our close religious relatives, the Jews and the Muslims. The Trinity matters, not just as a matter of dogma, but as a matter of informing us of the very nature of the God we follow.

The image of the Trinity at table, equal, sharing, and inviting us to share in the life of God, is an image of community. The Trinity is, at its very core, community. Augustine spoke of the lover, the beloved, and their mutual love as reflecting the Trinity. 20th Century theologian Robert Jenson puts it simply: “God is what happens between Jesus and his Father in their Spirit.”

The image of the Trinity in mutual relationship reminds us that God’s very nature is interdependent love. The sacred is always relational, never self-absorbed, always inviting, never excluding, always open to the new, never closed.

And as we are created in the image of the Triune God, it is in our relationality we can best experience and express our created purpose.

Trinity tells us *who we are to be* as created in God’s image. Trinity tells us we are to be community. We cannot be fully alive in God’s image if we are not in relation to others. We will be most like God when we live out our humanity in a way that is *like who God is*.

So what does this mean? We must have an interpersonal relationship with the interpersonal God. Our worship must reflect this relationship and our life together as people of God must be open and inviting and receptive to all people.

When I saw that huge picture of the three at table and thoughts of Trinity flashed through my mind, thoughts of you also flashed through my mind because I knew I would be soon returning to you. And you have definitely made a place for me and others here at your table at Lake Highlands Presbyterian Church.

This is a church where we all sit together at table. We gather around the Lord’s Table when we share Communion, yes. We also gather around the table when we celebrate. We gather around the table when we meet in committees. We gather around tables in people’s homes, at restaurants, at receptions. We gather around desks and bounce ideas back and forth. We gather around kitchen counters and make sandwiches. We gather in our cars for quiet discussion.

And I have seen your *koinonia*. Your openness to the Triune Spirit of God. Your hospitality, welcoming the other in your midst. This is not always comfortable. This is not always easy. We don't always like what happens when we do this, but we can be assured that when we do,

When we open our doors to anyone who walks in,
When we offer help to someone who asks,
When we set an extra place at the table,
When we celebrate and honor our diversity,
When we stretch our resources to give to others,

When we do this, we are embodying, we are incarnating the Triune God whose very essence is self-giving Love. In our loving and in our giving, Christ is born and the Father creates, and the Spirit blows again and again and again. Thanks be to God for the whole darn incomprehensible thing!