

Sermon for Trinity Sunday
May 27, 2018
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco
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It is an honor for me to be with you this morning, and to share the Gospel from this pulpit in which so many preachers, much greater than myself, have spoken.

And while I am grateful to Dean Malcolm for the invitation, I have to say that my initial enthusiasm was tempered by the realization that today is Trinity Sunday, the one Sunday in the entire church year that is dedicated to a doctrine. If you asked preachers to list their top 10 favorite Sundays to preach, the vast majority would not include Trinity Sunday in the list. Few preachers get excited about the idea of trying to explain the Trinity. And probably even fewer people who listen to sermons want to *hear* someone trying to explain the Trinity!

I'd like to share with you just a portion of one such attempt from the sixth century, attributed to a great luminary of the early church, St. Athanasius (who most likely did not write it):

. . . the catholic faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; Neither confounding the Persons; nor dividing the Essence. For there is one Person of the Father; another of the Son; and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one; the Glory equal, the Majesty coeternal. Such as the Father is; such is the Son; and such is the Holy Ghost. The Father uncreated; the Son uncreated; and the Holy Ghost uncreated. The Father unlimited; the Son unlimited; and the Holy Ghost unlimited. The Father eternal; the Son eternal; and the Holy Ghost eternal. And yet they are not three eternals; but one eternal. As also there are not three uncreated; nor three infinities, but one uncreated; and one infinite.

Can I get an "Alleluia"? Do you find your soul stirred? Or do you find that your brain is a bit fuzzy? Well, welcome to the world of Christian Trinitarian doctrine. My favorite line of this creed is how its section on the Trinity ends: "He therefore that will be saved, let him thus think of the Trinity." Really? This word formula is the way we are to think about God if we are to be saved? If that's the case then it seems to me that, to paraphrase St. Paul, we are of all people in the world most to be pitied.

I do not want to suggest that Christian doctrine is not important. But I do want to suggest that doctrinal formulas are not life-giving. They never contain life in themselves. Rather, they point us toward that which is life-giving, that is, they point us toward God. And so I would like to invite you this morning to abandon the idea that Trinity Sunday is dedicated to a doctrine. Instead, I would like to invite you to see this day as dedicated to the mystery of God. For it is in that mystery that life will be found.

This morning's readings from Isaiah and from John's Gospel are full of that divine mystery. In the case of Isaiah, we hear about what is essentially a mystical experience that the prophet had when he was serving in the Temple in Jerusalem, and which contained within it God's prophetic call to Isaiah. It was not a vision that was meant to explain God to Isaiah, but rather to pull Isaiah into the mystery of God in whose presence he suddenly found himself. The mystery of the divine presence filled Isaiah's heart and mind and soul with that invitation, "Whom shall I send, and who shall go for us?", and elicited Isaiah's consent to a prophetic vocation: "Here am I, send me!"

John's Gospel presents the mystery quite differently. Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night – a time of day that has an affinity with all things mysterious. He intends to begin a dialogue with Jesus, whom Nicodemus clearly finds mysteriously compelling. And suddenly he finds himself in the midst of a conversation that makes no sense to him – with ideas of being born again, Spirit blowing around like the wind full of unpredictable possibilities, including the possibility of seeing the kingdom of God. His only response is, "How can these things be?" Which is a somewhat polite way of saying, "What in the world are you talking about?" And Jesus says, "What? You're a teacher of Israel and you don't get it?" As if what Jesus is saying should be self-evident. I imagine Jesus with something of a wry smile, knowing full well that he is simply pointing Nicodemus toward the mystery of the divine, knowing that Nicodemus won't get what he's talking about until he is able to soak in that mystery for a while. And soak Nicodemus does, for later in John's Gospel we find him helping to entomb the body of the crucified Christ. His initiation by Jesus into the divine mystery didn't put him off – it drew him further in.

And I'm convinced that this is how the Christian vision of God as Trinity is meant to function for us: not as an intellectual description of who or what God is, but as a kind of cipher meant to draw us into the mystery of a God who refuses to be neatly pinned down and boxed up.

But if the Trinity is a such a cipher, it is of a very unique and particular kind. And, it is a cipher of which Scripture says that we human beings are the image. Which surely deepens the mystery for us because it means that when we contemplate the vision of God as Trinity, we are also contemplating the image in which we ourselves are made. And so deep within the mystery of God, we are meant to encounter the mystery of our own humanity. And this, perhaps, is where the rubber hits the road for us, where the mystery of God begins to matter most: where it shows up in us.

For centuries, Christian theology has focused on how God shows up in the individual human being. Theologians have long been trying to find various trinities within the human person that could be said to constitute the image of God within us. St. Augustine, for example, found that image in human memory, understanding, and will: a trinity of qualities that each person possesses; three qualities that make each individual a bearer of the divine image.

And this individual focus has been valuable, even though Christians have not always been successful at living into the full implications of it. Because this insistence that we are each made in the image of God is fundamentally the theological foundation of the idea of individual

rights, of the dignity and worth of each and every human person which the Western world has long championed, even as we have had trouble actually living it out and really applying it to each and every person. But the great movements of change that have swept the West – movements to liberate people from slavery, movements to bestow civil rights on people of color, movements to empower women and protect children, movements to grant equality to LGBTQ people – all of these movements, where they have intersected with the life of the church, have been able to call upon this vision of each human being as bearer of the divine image as a theological justification and foundation for their movement of liberation. And that has been a very good thing, indeed.

But notice that this idea of each individual made in the image of God does not necessarily require that we work out how that vision shows up in us in a Trinitarian way. And, as the Roman Catholic priest and mystic Richard Rohr has noted, most Christians don't generally think of the image of God within themselves as a Trinitarian image. Indeed, Rohr says, most Christians are not functionally Trinitarian. We are doctrinally Trinitarian, in the sense that we say we believe that God is Trinity, but it makes no practical difference to most of us. Despite the hope of the Athanasian Creed that we would walk about thinking deeply about God as three in one and one in three, we don't actually spend time doing that.

But I want to suggest that, if we are to be true to our Christian calling, we need to be thinking about what it means to be functional Trinitarians. We need to notice something about this vision of God as Trinity: that it is essentially a vision in which God is seen to exist as relationship. A vision in which individual elements named as Father, Son, and Spirit are eternally dancing in a state of mutual embrace that somehow mysteriously constitutes the very life of God. It is in this image that we human beings are made, and we need to explore what that means.

Recently, I attended a conference at which Lisa Sharon Harper was the theologian in residence. Lisa comes from the evangelical tradition, and she works to find ways of proclaiming the Gospel as truly good news in the midst of oppressed communities. Part of her journey has been a deep exploration of the Book of Genesis, where we first find that affirmation that we are made in the image of God. In her book, "The Very Good Gospel", Lisa points us toward another message that is connected to that affirmation: "God saw everything that [God] had made, and indeed, it was very good." Lisa insists that we cannot hear that we are made in the image of God without also hearing that this is "very good." But this is not just any sort of goodness.

She notes that in Hebrew, the word translated as "good" is *tov* – a word that does not so much refer to the goodness of something in itself, "but . . . to the ties between things." She writes, "In the Hebrew conception of the world, all of creation is connected. The well-being of the whole depends on the well-being of each individual part. The Hebrews' conception of goodness was different than the Greeks'. The Greeks located perfection in the object itself. A thing or person strove toward perfection. But the Hebrews understood goodness to be located *between* things. As a result, the original hearers would have understood *tov* to refer to the goodness of the ties and relationships between things in creation."

When we put this in the context of the Christian vision of God as Trinity, then we can connect the dots. God is experienced as good, as powerful, as just, as mighty, as compassionate – and all the other adjectives we might use to describe God – because of the eternal relationship *between* Father, Son, and Spirit -- or Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. It is the unending divine dance of the three embracing each other as one that leads to the overflowing divine goodness that has brought us – and all of creation – into being.

What an amazing thing it is to think about ourselves as created in *this* image. We are indeed each, individually, bearers of the image of God, each worthy of dignity, each equal in standing. **But it does no good to be a bearer of the image of God until you reach out in relationship toward others.** The goodness of humanity as created by God is seen only in the goodness that exists *between* us. It is impossible to be a “good person” unless one stands in a web of relationship in which goodness is made manifest.

There has perhaps never been a moment in human history when we need more to recover this profound vision that places relationship at the very center of who God is, and of who we are. We live in a time when people are seen to be increasingly disposable. We live in an age when too many people give into a selfishness, a narcissism, that sees the world as existing only to serve their particular needs. We live in a period when our own government has been elected on a platform of selfishness, a platform extolling the supposed virtues of living only for ourselves alone. And others who hold similar platforms around the world have been emboldened, and in some places, have gained power, with slogans like “Brexit” or “Austria for Austrians” or “Italians first”.

Imagine a world full of people who all put themselves first. It is a world in which the poor are ignored, the weak are pushed aside. It is a world where powerful people take all they can take and leave the less powerful to fend for themselves. It is a world where school children are killed, and no one cares. It is a world where people are ground down by war or poverty, and no one cares. It is a world in which people starve, and no one cares. It is a world where everyone lives in their own little silo, never lifting their eyes beyond their smartphone to notice the struggles and the suffering of others. It is a world that is coming into being in our midst. And it will only grow stronger if we do not do something about it.

To be functionally Trinitarian as Christian people is to realize that we cannot live this way. To be functionally Trinitarian is to recognize that the world I have just described is the very definition of hell. Lisa Sharon Harper notes that at the very beginning of creation, Genesis describes the earth as a “formless void” covered in darkness. Written as the people of Israel were emerging from the Babylonian exile, Lisa suggests that these words are meant to describe the world they were emerging from: a dark world of “misery, destruction, death, ignorance, wickedness, and sorrow.” In the midst of this darkness shines the light of the creating, Trinitarian God. Into this darkness flows the abundant goodness of the three in one. God is described as the antidote to the darkness, the hell, of a world that has abandoned the image in which it is made by ceasing to bring it to life in the in-between spaces.

Jesus came to show us how to attend to the spaces between us to bring the image of God – the goodness of God – to life. That is the kingdom of God that Nicodemus longed to see but which at first seemed so baffling. We, Jesus' followers, are the people charged with seeing this deep truth of the Trinitarian God. It is up to us to pour out the goodness of God that is in us in the relationships we create, in order that goodness may come into the world. It is up to us to see and to proclaim that we are not 6 billion people leading individual lives on this planet, but that we are one human family, living in intimate embrace. When we are able to live into this calling, to live as functional rather than theoretical Trinitarians, then, like Isaiah, we shall see the wonder of God opened before us. And, like Nicodemus, we will arrive at the tomb of the world as bearers of Resurrection light, the power of God to push back the world's darkness.

No, the Trinity is not just a doctrine – it is a way of life, it is the very spiritual DNA of creation. If we wish to truly live, we must live according to that DNA. To do otherwise is to distort our own nature, and to distort our relationship with God. The kingdom of God is within us – but that will not matter one bit unless we have the courage to bring it to life between us.