

THE TRINITY: IT'S NOT A MIND GAME

Trinity Sunday 2010

John 16:12-15; Romans 5:1-5

I have read that there was a time, around 320 A.D. more or less, that there were arguments in the streets among common people—sailors and travelers and moneychangers and bakers—arguments that bristled with as much passion and partisan zeal as say, New Yorkers arguing about the Yankees vs. Mets, or Chicagoans at each other over the White Sox vs. Cubs.

But these ancient street arguments were not over sports or politics.

They were over the Doctrine of the Trinity.

I read that in the early 300s, especially in Egypt, Syria, and Asia Minor, people on the streets were singing ditties, based on popular tunes, proclaiming that the Father alone was true God, but that the Son was neither co-eternal nor uncreated, since he proceeded from the Father.

I read that a market vendor, when giving his customers what they ordered, would add an unsolicited theological discourse, on whether the Father was greater than the Son.

What got these persons all inflamed was a theological controversy between Arius, and bishop Alexander and his sidekick Athanasius. Arius, apparently, was a charismatic figure, and a skilled propagandist, who put his dissenting beliefs to music, so the common people would help spread the word.

When things really started getting out of hand, Emperor Constantine summoned a council to Nicaea, in modern-day Turkey, to settle these questions.

And what resulted from a month of negotiations, was the Nicene Creed of 325 A.D.

But that didn't settle everything.

Many more councils ensued.

There was one in Constantinople in 381 that added several lines about the Holy Spirit, including that the Spirit proceeds from the Father.

There was one in Chalcedon in 451 which ruled that Jesus had two natures, both divine and human. That resulted in a major schism.

Then in 589, at the Third Council of Toledo (that's not Ohio, by the way), the Latin-speaking churches of Western Europe, added the words, "and the Son," (in Latin, *filioque*) so that now the Nicene creed said the Holy Spirit "proceeds from the Father *and* the Son."

The Eastern church found this addition unacceptable, because it equated the Father and Son.

The "filioque controversy" got political and personal, as not only the popes, but kings and emperors, took positions on it, over against each other, until in 1054 there was another major schism in the church, that continues today, separating Western Christianity from the Eastern, or Orthodox, Christianity.

A lot more *could* be said, but I try to make it a habit in my sermons not to bore you to tears.

Suffice it to say, the Doctrine of the Trinity, in the history of the Christian church, has been a hugely important issue.

What makes it so?

For one thing, saying God is both one, *and* three, creates difficulty for persons guided primarily by logic and reason. And we Western Christians, in particular, *love* logic and reason.

We have to work it out in some way
that makes sense for our logical minds.
Eastern Christians tend to experience it a different way.

We've been blessed for several weeks to have worshiping with us
a priest from the Eastern Christian tradition,
specifically the Coptic Orthodox church.
Now, Coptic Christians were part of that first schism after Chalcedon.
Sometimes they're called "non-Chalcedonian" Christians.
But I told you I wasn't going to bore you.

Father Luke, would you please come and join me here
behind the pulpit for a minute?
Just the fact that the two of us can stand behind the same pulpit
as brothers in Christ says a lot about how far the church has come,
since these divisions over the Trinity.

Father Luke, your church was brought into being
because of a particular way of stating the doctrine of the Trinity,
and the nature of God, as seen in Christ, and in the Holy Spirit.
But putting aside for now,
the finer theological points that make your tradition distinct,
I want simply to ask you one personal question,
and have you give a brief response.

What does the Trinity mean to you in your personal spiritual life?
In other words, why is believing in the Trinity
important to you personally,
in your experience of God?

Thank you, Father Luke.
For the most part,
Eastern and Western Christians get along fairly well today.
The popes and patriarchs have made null and void
earlier declarations that condemned each other.
And both Eastern and Western Christians are strongly Trinitarian.
But there is a difference in how the Trinity is approached.
We can describe that difference with the word "theory."

When we in the West use the word theory,
we are talking about a rational hypothesis,
which we try to prove,
or at least logically argue to be true.
And that's how we tend to approach Trinity, as a *theory*,
trying our best to "make sense" of it.

But in Eastern Christian theology,
the word theory, or in Greek *theoria*,
means contemplation.
It means to view or witness something, in this case, to "see God."
It's a stage on a deeply spiritual journey.

So Greek, and Russian, and Coptic Orthodox Christians,
continue to find that the contemplation of the Trinity
is an inspiring religious experience.
The Trinity can only be grasped intuitively,
and, as a result of a religious experience.
Meanwhile, Western Christians get hung up on the logic of it,
or lack thereof.
We are less comfortable with contemplating the mystery,
and allowing the mystery to be a vehicle for seeing God.

I would encourage us, when it comes to the Trinity,
to be more Eastern than Western.
As Bishop N. T. Wright of England has said,
the Trinity is not a mind game.
I quote,
"It would be a mistake to give the impression that
the Christian doctrine of God is a matter of
clever intellectual word games or mind games.
For Christians it's always a love game:
God's love for the world calling out an answering love from us."

We all, certainly, want to know God.
We wouldn't *be* here today, if that wasn't the case.

And there are different ways of knowing.
There is knowing arrived at through analysis,

and knowing arrived at through contemplation and experience.
We can learn to know something by dissecting and analyzing it.
Deconstructing it, and debating the details,
until we make conclusions about its essential nature.
That's what the ancient councils of the church were doing.
We can also learn to know something by living with it,
by relating our lives to it,
contemplating its beauty and wonder,
experiencing and interacting with it,
developing a relationship with it,
allowing the knowledge to transform us.
There are times and places to seek both kinds of knowledge of God.

Mind games are enjoyable to many of us, including myself.
Mind games can even be fruitful and productive.
But for the Doctrine of the Trinity,
let's get beyond the mind game, and make it a love game.
Let's marvel at the beauty
of a God who longs to relate to us in love.

We learn how to understand and relate to the Trinity,
through scripture,
even though the word Trinity doesn't appear in the Bible.
Paul, for instance, doesn't teach the doctrine of Trinity, per se.
like he teaches the doctrines of justification or sanctification.
Paul teaches relationship to God.

Paul describes, to the church in Rome,
in today's reading from Romans 5, for example,
how, because of Jesus,
we can relate to the God of the universe, in peace.
Romans 5:1—"We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,
through whom we have obtained access to this grace."
Paul says because of the Holy Spirit we can experience
the real and present love of God.
Verse 5: "God's love has been poured into our hearts
through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."
It's a concrete, present, multi-faceted relationship with a triune God,

that makes a joyful and hopeful life possible,
even in a world full of suffering, Paul says.

And the Gospel reading this morning, from John 16,
gives *another* picture of this relational God,
put into words by Jesus himself.
Jesus describes the Godhead as a divine community.
In John chapter 16, vv. 14-15,
Jesus describes to his disciples
this interactivity between himself and the Spirit and his Father.
"[The Spirit] will glorify me,
because he will take what is mine and declare it to you.
All that the Father has is mine.
For this reason I said that [the Spirit] will take what is mine
and declare it to you."

Jesus tried to reassure his disciples,
that they could experience the real presence of God
when he was no longer physically present.
Jesus was the incarnation of God.
God in real flesh.
God present. Emmanuel.
The disciples understood that.
But how was God going to continue to be present with them
when the incarnation ended?
when Jesus left them?

So Jesus reassured them they would *not* be abandoned.
God will continue to be present.
God will be with them through the Holy Spirit.

And that's what happened in the early church.
They experienced God's presence and activity
in many different ways.
And it was this lived experience of God,
that they wrote about in the scriptures,
and that informs our thinking today.
And it was the lived experience of God,
that early theologians tried to hammer out in words.

Yes, those early doctrinal councils had political aspects to them.
But *primarily*, they were just trying to find
adequate language for their experience.
This wasn't an ivory tower academic exercise.
If it *was*, I don't think there would have been
common folk in the market singing ditties about the Trinity.

God is *not* just a concept. God is known in relationship.
The Trinity, which we know because of Jesus,
keeps us grounded in the worship of a relational God.
It keeps us from making God into some cosmic notion of goodness.
Let me read a paragraph or two from the writings of N. T. Wright.
I may have read these before, but they bear repeating.
“Once we glimpse the doctrine of the Trinity”—
or we might substitute the Orthodox language—
“Once we [contemplate] the doctrine of the Trinity
we dare not slide back into . . . paying distant homage
to a god who is . . . merely a quasi-personal
source of general benevolence . . .
Christian faith is much more hard-edged, more craggy, than that.
Jesus exploded into the life of ancient Israel . . .
not as a teacher of timeless truths,
nor as a great moral example,
but as the one through whose life, death, and resurrection
God's rescue operation was put into effect,
and the [world] turned its great corner at last . . .
It is because of Jesus that Christians claim
they know who the creator God of the world really is.
It is because he, a human being,
is now with the Father in the dimension we call “heaven”
that Christians came so quickly to speak of God
as both Father and Son.
It is because he [is still] in heaven
while we are on earth . . .
that Christians came to speak of the Spirit, too . . .
[present with us] as a distinct member of the divine Trinity.
It is all because of Jesus that we speak of God the way we do.
And it is all because of Jesus that we find ourselves
called to live the way we do.”

The Trinity is not a dry, intellectual study of God's nature.
The Trinity is putting into words
what it means to worship a God who is with us, *really* with us,
in a way that puts a claim on our ordinary daily lives.
The Trinity compels us to respond to and relate to God,
one way or another.
Accept or reject. But respond, we must.
In obedience or in rebellion, but relate to God, we must.

Deep knowledge and experience of God
will not come from rational analysis or debate.
Contemplating the Trinity,
is like examining a multi-faceted gemstone that reflects the light
in different colors and intensities,
depending on the angle from which we're viewing it.
The Trinity helps us see God from three angles.
God the majestic sovereign,
creator of the universe,
all-knowing, all-powerful.
And, God who understands my human frailty,
God who has been in my shoes,
God who knows suffering, and *continues* to suffer.
And, God who is near to comfort,
to guide and empower in the present,
to speak the words of God to us today.
God who brings together earth and heaven.

It is our life calling to know this God,
not by looking on from a distance,
but by engaging in practices
that nurture a deeper knowledge and participation in God.

Let us commit ourselves to a life of contemplation and action,
that we might be drawn into the embrace of our loving God.

In response, let us sing the hymn printed on the bulletin insert.
No matter by what name we name God—
Eternal Light, Eternal Hope, Eternal Power, Eternal Wisdom.
Eternal Life, Eternal Brightness, Eternal Spirit, Eternal Savior.

The aim of our coming to God is the same—
to come before your face to know you, my eternal God.

—*Phil Kniss, May 30, 2010*