

Sermon 05-30-10—Trinity Sunday

Well, here we are in the middle of Memorial Day weekend, and today is Trinity Sunday--although I'll bet that's **not** the reason that you came to church this morning!

Why indeed do we have a special day, Trinity Sunday? We say that God relates to us and to all of his creation as three different persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. But we also say that there is only one God. Trying to make sense of these apparent contradictions can be either totally confusing, totally boring, or both!

That's why I like the story about a detective who had learned to evaluate what he was getting from a suspect under investigation. If the suspect were trying to establish his credibility by describing himself as a Christian, the detective would simply ask him if he understood the doctrine of the Trinity. If the suspect said he understood the Trinity, then the detective could quickly conclude that the suspect had to be a total liar.

The truth is, that to describe God as three persons -- God as Father, as Son, and as Holy Spirit -- is to say that the nature of God is a mystery that theologians all through the centuries have been trying to make intelligible.

A very quick way to describe God as a "trinity of persons" is for me to think of a book. First, there is the idea, the vision of reality that the author seeks to put in words. Second, there is the completed book in print and, finally, there is the readers' response and the impact that the book has in those readers' lives. So there is one God, but there is the creator Father; the Son, who made the idea and the vision of God a

reality on earth; and the Holy Spirit, whose power takes the truth about God the Creator and God the Son out into the world.

What do you think? By itself, this analogy may be too simplistic, but at least it sets us off in the right direction - and that direction is toward the future. That is where old St. John takes us with the Gospel passage this morning: "*When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.*"

That is where the Spirit takes us. I still remember when I was in college going after a fraternity meeting to a Sunday night service at a Fundamental Baptist Church. We tried to be inconspicuous by sitting in the balcony, but a deacon found us and confronted us with the question, "Are you saved?" Along with most of us, I didn't know what to say, but one of our group did speak up, saying, "I am saved, I was saved, I am **being** saved!" At that the deacon walked away. Salvation is always in process.

Salvation is in the journey. It's always been that way. It all started with the power and the loving impact of Jesus. This real man made a real difference in the lives of a small band of people. Unaccountably, or nearly so, that small band made a difference in the world. But as he faced his own end, as it became increasingly clear to him that his time on earth was up, Jesus assured his friends of one fact: that he would go, but they would not be alone. And not only that, they would continue to learn and grow.

Jesus is speaking to people who had grown up in the Hebrew tradition, with the daily call: "The Lord is one." Then they began to experience, through Jesus, the concentrated and real power - in real time - of that God. And in his last days, he promised the gift of the Holy Spirit to lead

them after his death. When that Spirit came, it came powerfully -- upsetting them, energizing them, sending them out. So it is not hard to understand that, through these experiences, all of which they felt came from one God, they began to fashion an understanding of God as the Trinity.

In one way or another I get questions from people asking me to “explain” God. But for me to try to **explain** God is to **reduce** God.

Any God worth worshiping is beyond our definitions. So if the God we worship is the God of the future, it is self-evident, then, that truth is an ongoing, unfolding revelation. God's truth cannot be static or frozen into formulas.

Jesus tells his disciples that the Holy Spirit “will guide them into all truth.” All four evangelists — Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John — make it clear that the disciples did not understand the words and works of Jesus at the time, and all of them wrote about Jesus based upon the light of their **later** faith. In the same way, for all of us, the Christian message is an unfolding one. The work of the spirit of truth will be to guide us along the road that we must — like the Israelites — travel toward the fulfillment of the promise. As we travel this road, we will - just like the disciples – be confronted with wholly new situations, new peoples, and new cultures. In each new situation, it is insufficient to simply quote Jesus’ words. We must trust that the Spirit of truth will show us the way to go by speaking the word of God for **that** situation.

To speak the word of God in new situations, to new peoples and new cultures means that we cannot rely just on “doctrine” alone. In fact, Anglican theology is based upon the three-legged stool of scripture, evolving tradition, and reason. We believe that we should be informed

by the pronouncements of church leaders, by scripture, by evolving church tradition, and by reasoning from our own experience. The Church can abide in the truth *only if it is a **learning** Church*.

It's the same way for the Church as it is for all fields of learning. For instance, as a senior citizen, I know a lot of doctors! I've learned from my experience, and from those doctors, that in medicine, as in all fields of scientific inquiry, the accepted facts and reality of even a few years ago have become almost folklore today, because so much new information and knowledge has been developed and communicated, at an increasingly rapid pace. If you're saving your childhood World Book encyclopedias or high school reference books, you might as well throw them away!

Truth marches on and is shaped and reshaped as new knowledge is revealed. When we think about Galileo and Copernicus, who were branded as heretics by popes in their time, we know that later Popes had to reject those earlier pronouncements, as they recognized evolving scientific knowledge. In the same way, as examples, Churches must now recognize how evolving understanding and scientific knowledge from stem-cell research, the birth-control pill 50 years ago, or the atomic bomb in 1945 inevitably are changing the way that the Church's teaching on so many subjects is taught and received.

One day, a small boy was sitting on his front steps, looking crestfallen and discouraged because he wasn't doing very well at anything. The parish rector walked by, saw him, and tried to encourage him and talk him into a better mood, saying, "Remember, Bobby, God loves you! he created you!" To which Bobby replied, "Well, he certainly isn't finished yet!"

No, thank God --- He is not finished with **any** of us. We have so much more to learn about the one God whom we know as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and we have so much more to learn about the world in which we live. Trinitarian faith is like that. It opens up the eyes of people like you and me to perceive that the Spirit of Truth is guiding us into new truths **every day of our lives**.

That's why you're here this morning! Ours is a faith that knows just enough about God to come to worship, to build a life around the worshipping community, and to admit that in this life God can never be fully known. It's a faith held by people who are touched by the mystery of God and who would like to invite others into it. It is faith for the long haul, deep and abiding — and it is yours for the asking!

AMEN!