

Trinity Sunday

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There was a young man in seminary. He was preparing for an oral exam and decided to synthesize everything he learned about theology. He took the 10 assigned books and condensed them into 10 chapters, then he summed up the chapters into 10 sentences and then reduced that down to 10 words and then ultimately into a single word. They called him into the exam and as soon as he stood in front of his professors he forgot the word. It wasn't that he lacked knowledge, but he did lack understanding.

This is Trinity Sunday, where we proclaim God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is the week that we try to do what the student could not. We try to condense all of theology into three words while not forgetting what it all means. It is the only Sunday in the Christian year that asks preachers to preach a doctrine, that is found nowhere in the scriptures explicitly. Instead the doctrine is distilled from the way that Jesus describes his relationship to the Father, the Creator, and to the Comforter, the Holy Spirit. The Gospel for today offers us the closest scriptural reference for the trinity in what is called the Great commission of Matthew.

It comes as the climatic the end of the Gospel. The now eleven disciples have gathered one last time on the mountain of revelation to be given their instructions. The writer beautifully condenses the theology of the book into these few verses without losing the meaning. And he even describes it in a trinity. He first talks about the past. All authority was given by God to Jesus. And he began teaching the disciples how to walk in love as Christ loved us. This commissioning doesn't happen until the very end. In the beginning they are given the corporeal acts of mercy in the Sermon on the Mount which is the summary of the teachings of the prophets. We first have to learn what it means to go out and practice this thing called religion. Before we can understand, we have to practice the discipline of love. Then he talks of the present. Now that we have worked we can go out and teach and baptize. During this season of graduations it is appropriate to celebrate teaching. It is the teachers who help us sort through a world of knowledge. Here we have so many teachers to thank. In Rwanda at the genocide memorial there was a powerful witness to how destructive politics and theology can be. I thought of the theology that John Thatamanil and Jeanne Bodfish have tried to teach us about respect and nonviolence. On the altar is a small rock for both of them in thanksgiving for their teaching and trying to keep us peaceful in this world. Finally he speaks of the future and because it is a parting, there is some sadness in their commissioning. It is time for the disciples to go out on their own and incorporate what has been taught and the gifts given. I can imagine the after they leave the struggle to remember the meaning. There is a song from hymnal that their lives were strife found in the sand. That John was exiled and

died and Peter was head-down crucified. For the future he leaves us the gift of the Holy Spirit. He reminds us that when we are in prayer, we are in the presence of God.

Ever since we have been trying to discern his meaning. Over and over great and brilliant theologians have written volumes trying to help us gain greater understanding of the triune God. St. Patrick writes about God as the three leaf clover that comes from a single stem. St. Bernard describes the trinity in terms of a kiss: God the Father is the kisser, Jesus the son is the Kissed and the Holy Spirit is the kiss itself. Even Anglicanism is based on the notion that a three-legged stool of reason, scripture and history is a trinity upon which to build a faith.

It is in the practice of the teaching that a deeper understanding is possible. That is why it feels like there are always nuisances and deeper dimensions even within our perfect trinities. In the description of the clover, there are ones with four leaves that are considered the luckiest. In the description of the kiss it is the longing between the kisses that can be the most powerful. In the three legged stool of our faith there has long been a tradition of a fourth mysterious leg called revelation.

All our experience, theology and doctrine begin with one word, "God". And from that we form three words and call it a trinity that creates, redeems and inspires. God is our past, present and future. We take that and go out to love one another by living out the Sermon on the Mount, then we preach and baptize. From this doctrine we can write a volume on each word. From these volumes we fill libraries with different interpretations and understandings, both faithful and heretical. And that is just the beginning of understanding. We could write all that was in the beginning, is now and will be forever and still the reality of God could not be contained.