

Trinity Sunday
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[16] Meanwhile, the eleven disciples were on their way to Galilee, headed for the mountain Jesus had set for their reunion. [17] The moment they saw him they worshiped him. Some, though, held back, not sure about worship, about risking themselves totally.

[18] Jesus, undeterred, went right ahead and gave his charge: "God authorized and commanded me to commission you: [19] Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. [20] Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I'll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age."

Matthew 28:16-20 (MsgB)

PERCEPTION PROBLEM

Who do you know better than anyone else in the whole world? I would nominate my wife for that honor.

I know her very well, and she knows me very well. Indeed, we know each other so well that sometimes we even complete each other's sentences!

This coming November, Lord willing, we will have been together for 30 years.

We're very close, but even in the closest relationship there is mystery.

Sometimes I think that men are more mystified by their wives than visa versa, but all of us should respect the fact that we can't understand everything about a person, no matter how long we have known them.

In fact, I have met some married couples that have grown apart over the years because they have not taken the time to share their lives with each other.

They assumed that they knew everything about each other, but that assumption was a false one.

Knowing another person well is dependent upon that other person being willing to share who they are and what is most important to them. I can only know you insofar as you are willing to tell me your story, and you can only know me insofar as I am willing to tell you my story.

And even if we trust each other enough to tell that story, I still can't know you completely. All of us have major blind spots even when it comes to our own lives.

My perception of you and your perception of me will be distorted by our personal histories.

Our hopes, fears and dreams will shape what we think of each other, and to a certain extent, that personal history will keep us from knowing each other completely.

Let me give you an example of how this works.

Occasionally, I will meet a person who has had an unpleasant experience with some religious figure. Perhaps, some minister or some church leader did something that caused a big problem in their lives.

Sometimes, when these people meet me, just because I am a minister, they assume (probably subconsciously) that I am going to be like those folks with whom they have had trouble in the past. They will not trust what I have to say, and they may even be hostile to me from the very beginning.

They are dealing with me on the basis of their past and not on the basis of who I am.

This is a common problem, and it explains why there is so much conflict and prejudice in the world.

We really don't know each other.

And instead of listening to each other's story, we often listen to our own fears and needs instead.

We look at everyone through the filter of our unique experience.

In most cases (fortunately) our communication is not totally distorted, but we should be aware of this perception problem.

We all have this perception problem to a certain degree, and for this reason we should only we should never assume that we know anyone completely.

We must approach every relationship with a sense of mystery and awe.

AN AMERICAN GOD

Now, if you believe all that I just said, if you believe that we cannot know even the person closest to us completely, why do so many of us act as if we can fully understand God?

We say the word, "God" and think that everyone knows the One to whom that title refers. But, that's just not true.

Our assumptions about God are based upon our religious background, our cultural background and our own personal history. Even those of us who have grown up in the same denomination probably do not mean the same thing when we talk about God.

Alan Bloom in his book, *American Religion*, suggests that we Americans have made one distinctive "contribution" to the theology of the church.

The traditional church has always said that we have a need to be with God. "What is the chief end of man?" Our chief end (says the Shorter Catechism) is to glorify God and enjoy God forever.

But, according to Bloom, American Christianity has taken the emphasis off of our need to be with God and placed the emphasis upon God's "need" to be with us. We have made God into a "good buddy" who wants to pal around with us and satisfy our desires.

Instead of asking what is the chief end of men and women, we have asked, "What is the chief end of God?"

And how do we answer that question?

We say in effect, "The chief end of God is to glorify us and give us what we want." And the shape of that "god" varies depending upon who we are and what we want.

I like the way Charles Wiley puts it in his article on the Trinity from our denomination's web site. He wrote,

"One of the chief characteristics of American religion is a conviction that nothing stands between us and God. Harry Truman said, 'I'm a Baptist because I think that sect gives the common man the shortest and most direct approach to God.' We are Harry Trumans run amok.

People today have moved beyond rejection of the church and doctrinal systems to ambivalence about the specific need for the work of the Son and the Spirit. We are 'spiritual, but not religious,' finding God within ourselves."

A GOD OF OUR OWN MAKING

The ancient world was filled with "gods."
And the Old Testament prophet Isaiah was especially critical of the folly of such an approach.

He painted a picture of the poor unsophisticated soul, who chopped down a tree, made a fire with part of the wood to cook his supper and with the wood that was left over fashioned an idol that he worshipped.

He prayed to the idol,
"Save me, for you are my god!" (Isaiah 44:17)

We may be tempted to dismiss such idol worship, thinking that it is just a problem of the ancient past. But, I'm here to tell you that idolatry is alive and well today.

It's alive and well in those who would worship their own needs and desires instead of the one true God as revealed in Scripture. This kind of religion is very modern indeed. I would call it "me centered" religion.

"Me centered" religion sacrifices the holiness, the "otherness" of God. "Me centered" religion makes no room in life for the special revelation of God's glory and Spirit as revealed in Christ Jesus.

I think that we can see the effects of this trend in recent church architecture.

One preacher said that some of our new churches no longer point our hearts and minds upward. They are designed more for comfort than for worship and so many of our buildings look more like carpeted bedrooms than sanctuaries!

In my mind, that analogy really "hits the nail on the head."

If the church concentrates too much upon what "we" want and what "we" need from God, the church is turned into a bedroom where everyone is asleep to the true nature of the God as revealed in the Bible.

We are unable to know the one true God because we have placed our emphasis in the wrong place. We have asked the wrong question.

We need to remember that we do not worship a "god" whom we have fashioned with our own hands and desires. We worship a God who has fashioned us and has chosen to reveal Himself to us in a specific way.

THE TRINITY: GOD'S SELF-REVELATION

That's why the doctrine of the Trinity is so important. The Doctrine of the Trinity is a shorthand way of talking about God's special revelation to us. The Doctrine of the Trinity is a holy mystery revealed in the Word of God.

Indeed, the Doctrine of the Trinity represents the essence of the Christian faith. If we get this wrong, we will get everything else wrong.

The Doctrine of the Trinity is not an optional extra. It is not a strange mathematical problem to be worked out. It is the very essence of what we believe and teach.

If we want to know God, it's just like getting to know a person. We have to listen to God's story as God tells it in Holy Scripture and not as we would like it to be or imagine it to be.

Did you notice what Jesus told his disciples to do in our lesson for today?

He told them to go into the whole world and make more disciples. And how would they make disciples? They would make disciples by teaching these new converts His words and commands.

We know that these commands of Christ were many and complex, but they are all based on one core belief, God was in Christ. Or, as Jesus put it in our passage for today,

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." (Mt. 28:18)

If we believe that, if we believe that God was in Christ, then all that we do must meet the Godly standard set by Jesus.

On our own we can't live up to that standard, but by the power of the Spirit we are enabled to receive forgiveness for our sins and live the life of faith.

This would be the essence of the apostle's teaching, and it would result in converts being baptized in the name "of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." This is not just a liturgical formula that we repeat as a blessing at the end of the service or after a baptism. It is the Christian way of knowing God.

God is the one God who reveals Divinity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

God is the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

God, the Father of the universe is revealed in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. This revelation is conveyed to us through the sanctifying and healing work of the Holy Spirit.

Through the work of the Spirit we are baptized with forgiveness and enabled to do the Heavenly Father's will as revealed in Jesus Christ.

The same Spirit, who created us, saves us and sustains us.

The Bible teaches us that God is as close as our own skin and yet God is also above and beyond us.

The whole earth is filled with God's glory, but God's glory goes beyond the glory of the earth.
God is the author of creation, but God is not to be equated with His creation.

GOD IN THREE "PERSONS"

One important point to remember about the Trinity is that when God is revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we are talking about three distinct roles, but God fulfills these three distinct roles at the same time.

When we sing "God in three persons, blessed Trinity," I'm sure some of you think, "Three persons? Does that mean there are three gods?" The answer is no.

The term "person" refers to a Greek play in which one person took on different personalities, donning a different mask and playing several roles. It was one person, but that versatile person could act in different ways.

All of our attempts to illustrate the Trinity fall short, but the one that I find most helpful is this one. I am a father, I am a husband, and I am a son.

Those roles are distinct, but I am all three.

All of these roles represent the essence of who I am, but I am just one person.

THE PROBLEM OF WORSHIP

According to our lesson for today, really understanding God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit begins with worship.

But, most of us find it hard to worship. Oh, we are able to talk about worship and religion and ethics.

But, often we can't worship. We can't embrace the mystery of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. We can't fall on our faces in wonder and awe.

And because of that, we hold back the life changing wind of the Spirit.

Why is that?

Why is it so difficult for us to worship?

I think it is because there is an element of doubt that keeps us from really trusting Jesus as their Savior and Lord. We want to hold on to the old life so much that we cannot embrace the new with the kind of abandon that is necessary for true worship.

We are afraid (perhaps rightly) that worshipping the God who is revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit will not be an easy experience. After all, at the heart of the Christian faith is a cross.

If we hold on to our own ideas about God, we can adjust the message when it gets too tough.

But, this is not the case if we allow ourselves to worship. If we worship the God of the Bible, the God who is revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, our life is changed forever.

I am once again indebted to Eugene Peterson's amplified translation of the Bible, The Message for this insight. He translates verse 17,

"The moment they saw him they worshiped him. Some, though, held back, not sure about worship, about risking themselves totally."

Matthew 28:17 (MsgB)

Do you see what Peterson has done? He has translated "doubt" as holding back worship. Many of us are willing to study and think about new ideas.

But, when it comes to worship, when it comes to risking our whole life on something or someone, then we're not so sure.

But, that's what we're called to do by the Spirit who reveals the will of the Father as embodied in Christ Jesus.

TRINITARIAN ETHICS

When we speak about the Triune God, we speak of a great mystery. After all, we are talking about the inner life of the Almighty.

But, worshipping the God revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, also gives us very practical guidance about how to live our lives.

Desmund Tutu in his book, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, talks about a word from the Nguni people of Africa.

The word, ubuntu, means "my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound, in yours ... a person is a person through other persons."

"A person with ubuntu," Tutu says, "is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole."

Now this marvelous word is not just some abstract concept. It formed the basis for the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission after the fall of apartheid in South Africa.

For those of you who might not remember, the work of this Commission brought an end to the cycle of violence that had enveloped that country, and they did it using the tool of forgiveness.

Tutu wrote,

"The tortured could look in the eye the very people who had tortured them and say,
'What you did to me was a crime because I am a human being and not an animal. And you are responsible for it because you are a human being and not an animal. My humanity is tied up in yours.

My humanity is affirmed by my choice today to treat you as a human being, who even now can make the choice not to behave hurtfully.
Wounding you and punishing you will not heal me.

I forgive you.'"

Ubuntu is not a word we use, but suppose we believed in and even worshipped something or someone like it.

Suppose we believed that the Father of this world created it out of love and hope.

Suppose we believed that this loving Creator is gracious and forgiving even to those who persecute and crucify His Son.

And suppose we believed that this loving grace continues in a community of people who are knit together by God's Spirit.

Those of us who worship the God revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit don't have to "suppose." We are God's children, and as such, we are called to live in a way that reflects the God we worship and serve.

The Doctrine of the Trinity is at its heart a doctrine of love. The Doctrine of the Trinity is God's love letter to the world. It is God's self-revelation. It is God's way of saying, "From creation to the end of time I am with you."

In the year 2000 a study group in the Presbyterian Church wrote a paper on the Trinity entitled, "The Trinity: God's Love Overflowing." Let me close this morning with a brief quote from that study paper. They wrote,

"In sovereign love God created the heavens and the earth and called and formed the people of Israel to be a light to all the nations.

In costly grace the Lord, Jesus Christ ministered among us and was crucified and raised for us and for our salvation.

In transforming power the Holy Spirit renews and sanctifies us, draws us into new communion with God and each other, awakens our praise, and worship, and equips us for the service of God in the world.

The Triune God does all this through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit."

(See 2 Corinthians 13:14)

And now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN