

A Sermon by the Rev. Margery E. Howell

Trinity Sunday, Year C

John 16: 12-15

“Trinity-what and why do we believe?”

So, here we are, the first Sunday after Pentecost, and we find ourselves on Trinity Sunday. We’ve celebrated Easter for seven weeks enjoying the beauty of the resurrection and ascension and the return of the “a” word. Last Sunday was Pentecost when we celebrated the birth of the church; the day when the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples, which caused them to speak in languages they didn’t know, and three thousand people were baptized. For seven weeks, the vestments and hangings in the church were white. Last Sunday, the vestments and hangings were red, and today, we are back to white vestments and hangings. So, how do we come to understand what the Trinity means to us today?

Trinity is not a feast day like Christmas, Easter or Pentecost, and not a holy season like Advent or Lent. No, Trinity is one of the doctrines of our church. Doctrine, meaning what we believe as Episcopalians, but where is the doctrine found, why is it part of our faith, and why did Jesus never mention the word Trinity? The doctrine is found in the Athanasian Creed on page 864 in the Prayer Book. In that

ancient creed, which was used for worship before the Apostles or Nicene Creed came to be, the statement, “I believe in the Holy Spirit,” reveals the beginnings of the Trinity. And this doctrine is also developed through the community of the writer of the Gospel of John. As John reveals the circumstances of the hurt and anger in the community-those who were “in” and those who were “out,” John gives us a “remarkable blending of Greek philosophy and classic Jewish theology, which allows for the development of our doctrine of the Trinity. The message of this Doctrine is one of inclusion-not exclusion. It is a teaching about God that insists on love as a way of life-not condemnation. The doctrine of the Trinity is a poetic and inspired response to the fact of Jesus Christ. The doctrine of the Trinity is also a speculative statement about the nature of God.”¹

Now, it is difficult to explain in a sermon, or even in writing, the meaning of the word Trinity or how God revealed God’s self as one God with three manifestations. The mystery of the Trinity is just that-a mystery that overwhelms our brains. The truth of this mystery is something that we gradually understand as we mature in age and wisdom. The truth of the mystery comes as we follow a daily walk of faith so that when the Spirit of truth comes, as Jesus promises, we will be guided into all truth.

¹ Capellaro, John, “A Trinity of Inclusion”, Searching the Heart of God, pages 125-126.

Frederick Buechner, in his book, Wishful Thinking, says this about Trinity.

“The much-maligned doctrine of the Trinity is an assertion that, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, there is only one God.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit mean that the mystery beyond us, the mystery among us, and the mystery within us are all the same mystery. Thus the Trinity is a way of saying something about us and the way we experience God.

The Trinity is also a way of saying something about God and the way he is within himself, i.e., God does not need the Creation in order to have something to love, because within himself love happens. In other words, the love God is is love not as a noun but as a verb. This verb is reflexive as well as transitive.

If the idea of God as both Three and One seems farfetched and obscure, look in the mirror someday.

There is (a) the interior life known only to yourself and those you choose to communicate it to (the Father). There is (b) the visible face, which in some measure reflects that inner life (the Son). And there is (c) the invisible power you have which enables you to communicate that interior life in such a way that others do not merely know about it, but know it in the sense of its becoming part of who they are (the Holy Spirit). Yet what you are looking at in the mirror is clearly and indivisibly the one and only you.”²

Although the word Trinity is not found in the canon of scripture, most Christians are well versed in the language of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Some argue that the notion of the Trinity leads to polytheism; most scholars note the unique solidarity of character and mission among Father, Son and Spirit.

And yet describing God can present a problem. Walter Brueggemann address God as “One who is other than us.” And Brueggemann also describes God as the divine “Other” for whom we have no comprehensive description or corresponding reality, only a wealth of similes and metaphors.

² Buechner, Frederick, Wishful Thinking, page 114.

All this confusion leads to God being described as anthropomorphic because human terminology provides our only vocabulary of reference. We recognize that God's realm of being supersedes our human emotion and anatomy and with the language we have, we describe God as greater than the confines of our vocabulary. But we keep probing for understanding God and through prayer and our faith journey we come to have the understanding that a more intimate acquaintance with God emerges from our experiences in our journey of faith-not just a single epiphany.

Marcus Borg, in his book The Meaning of Jesus, says, "in both Greek and Latin, the word translated 'person' means a mask, such as that worn by an actor in the theater-not as a means of concealment, but as a way of playing different roles. Applying this to the notion of God, the one God is known in three primary ways: as the God of Israel, as the Word and Wisdom of God in Jesus, and as the abiding Spirit."³

The root of the word *trinity* is *unity*. As we continue to explore our own understanding of what it means to worship and relate to our triune God, may we think of God as one, manifest in all three roles, without contradiction. We might like to think of God the Father as the divine parent, beyond

³ Christian Century, May 15, 2013, page 21.

human gender, who birthed and nurtured all of creation. We might think of God the Son, the historical Jesus, as the human portrait of God. And we might think of the Holy Spirit as the personality of God, both Father and Son, present and interactive in the world today.

May we all continue to discover the love of God, the grace of God and the joy of God through the mystery of the Trinity. And as we do, may our faith journeys help us to understand and experience how and where God intersects daily with our lives and world. AMEN