

**The Episcopal Church in the Pemi-Baker Valley**  
**Trinity Sunday     June 11, 2017**

Today is Trinity Sunday, the only Sunday in the church year devoted to a doctrine, an idea, our understanding of who God is. This is the Sunday when we celebrate what we can know about God, but with that celebration must always go the awareness of how much more God is than what we can know.

I once heard the story of a four year-old who was struggling with the concept of God and where God might be. The little boy, whose name was Callum, sat at the breakfast table and asked his mother, "Is God everywhere?" His mother replied, "Yes, dear, God is everywhere." Then came the next question, "Is God in this room?" "Yes, Callum, God is here." And finally he asked, "Is God in my mug?" His mother, growing a bit uneasy, said, "Er...uh...well, yes." And with that Callum clapped his hand over his mug, saying "Got him!"

Sometimes I think Callum is like those theologians who go to great pains to spell out exact who God is, as if we could ever, in our finite minds, say of the infinite, "Got him!"

There was a time early in my ministry when I would dread the thought of having to preach on this, the only Sunday in the Church Year that focuses on a church doctrine. I suppose that anxiety was caused by an expectation that I should produce some sort of perfectly-worded, philosophically accurate, readily understandable explanation of the doctrine and metaphysics of the fourth and fifth century Church Fathers, who crafted the Nicene Creed and its doctrine of the Trinity.

After all these years, I find myself less concerned with theological perfections, for I understand the impossibility of ever doing God justice by talking about God as if we had this all clearly wrapped up in some sort of neat package.

Actually, one of the most significant things about being an Episcopalian, for me, is our intentional lack of certainty and definition, our refusal to spell out exactly what each and every one of us must believe. And while our liturgy calls on us to recite the Nicene Creed each Sunday, no one is expected to fully comprehend or defend its philosophical concepts. As Karen Armstrong said "Jesus did not spend a great deal of time discoursing about the Trinity, or original sin or the incarnation which have preoccupied later Christians. He went around doing good and being compassionate."

When studying the Bible carefully, one finds a few, and only a few, Trinitarian expressions in the New Testament. We heard two today. From the final lines of Matthew's gospel, we hear Jesus' instruction to "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.*" And likewise from the close of the Apostle Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, we heard a variation of that Trinitarian formula in the form of a blessing: "*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with all of you.*"

But aside from these two lines, there is really no doctrine of the Trinity explicitly spelled out in the Bible. What we have, rather, is a variety of responses of the early faith communities to their experience of God: the creator of all that is, the redeemer of human experience, and the sanctifying presence of God throughout history in the lives of every day people. As Herbert O'Driscoll once put it, "we do not think about the Trinity so much as we experience it. Only then do we understand. And here is the paradox," he says, "that we understand the Trinity most when we realize that we do not understand."

The being of God, any of us would admit, must be an incomprehensible mystery, beyond the understanding of the human mind, but that doesn't mean we, each, haven't had moments when we stand in awe and wonder at our experience of the mystery of God and God's creation.

The long passage from the opening chapter of Genesis, which was our first lesson this morning, comes to us from centuries of oral tradition, the repeating of stories, handed down from generation to generation, often told around the campfires of migrating nomads throughout the second millennium before Christ. Much of what is found in Genesis also appears in similar form in the stories of other Middle-Eastern religions. as ideas were shared when various peoples made contact with one another.

One of the odd and perhaps remarkable things about that first creation story is how the sequence of "days" almost parallels the notions of modern science and evolution. First there is only void and darkness, then what we might call a "big bang" of light. And then, in God's creative imagination, a world evolves, first with liquid and then with the appearance of dry land. And then before animal life, we see vegetation. Later, there appear swarms of living creatures, things of the sea, and then birds. And only late in the account do we hear of creatures of the land and finally humankind that is given the responsibility of having dominion and stewardship over not just every creature, but over creation itself.

I'm not remotely suggesting that Genesis is a basis for the theory of evolution, for that was not the purpose for telling and retelling this version of creation. The point of the whole narrative is that the world that we experience is the result of God's action, God's love. And amazingly, despite earthquake and tsunami, in spite of famine and flood, this creation is declared "good." At each interval, this story of the beginnings of all things pauses, and says that "God saw that it was good." And then at the last, in summation, we hear: "And it was so. God saw everything that God has made, and indeed, it was very good."

The psalm that we read last Sunday spoke of creation when it said "*Yonder is the great and wide sea with its living things too many to number, creatures both small and great. There move the ships, and there is that leviathan, which you made for the sport of it.*"

The Jews, for the most part, were not sea-going people like their neighbors the Phoenicians. But the psalmist speaks of the sea and the leviathan, the large sea monster, which was probably the whale. Yet there is no fear here, just a marvel that God would create something so large and so magnificent "*just for the sport of it.*"

Our previous Presiding Bishop Katharine Jeffers Schori, before she was ordained, was an oceanographer, and she once spoke about whales while addressing the House of Bishops. She told her fellow bishops how each whale, coming to its breeding ground, sings one song. These songs, which travel many miles under the water, are distinct, and they are different for each whale. But as Bishop Schori noted, when they go away after their time together, each and every whale sings a new and slightly different song, because they have listened and heard what the others sang.

I think that is a wonderful metaphor for what our experience of the Christian community can be. We each come here singing our different song. But when the church is at its best, we go away still singing our own song, but in a slightly different way, because we have been listening to one another.

Paul's letter to the fractious church in Corinth addressed a congregation that seems to have had difficulty listening to one another. And Paul concludes his correspondence with one final appeal to the Corinthians to put away their partisan bickering and senseless divisions. *"Put things in order,"* Paul writes, *"listen to my appeal, agree with one another, (and) live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you."*

Paul isn't suggesting that each and every one of us should all agree on every theological understanding, let alone whom to vote for. No, by saying *"agree with one another,"* I think he means 'agree to disagree.' Play nice. Respect the views of others, opinions that are not your own. And by living thus in peace with one another, you will discover that God's love and peace will be yours, and you may go away singing a slightly different song.

From today's gospel we hear the final words of Jesus to his disciples, as recorded by Matthew. On Easter Day, in Matthew's account, none of the men see the Risen Jesus, only the women do. And the women report Jesus' instructions that the others are to go to Galilee where they will see him.

Today's reading relates that encounter, saying, *"When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted."* Did you hear that last part? *But some doubted.* What did they doubt? Were they doubting themselves, or what they saw, or were they doubting that Jesus was the one to be worshipped as a manifestation of God? It doesn't say.

But notice: the community of faith, from its inception, had a place for doubters, for those who could not agree on what they believed. But that didn't deter them from going out and making disciples of all people, teaching and living the will of Christ as each understood it. I wish that something of that inclusivity could be understood and appreciated in our divided expressions of Christianity today.

You may have noticed that I have talked only about today's readings and not so much about the doctrine of the Trinity or the Nicene Creed. But if, for you, all those notions of the three-in-one God seem too theological, then you might simply want to consider the analogy proposed by St. Augustine. To think of one God in three persons, he said, is to behold at one time the Lover, the Beloved, and Love. God is each, and somehow God is all: Lover, Beloved and Love.

There is really no one meaning of the Trinity, or only one way of describing that reality which we call God – but rather we have a broad tradition of faithful responses to God, shared over the centuries. No one creed fully expresses the experience of all Christian people, but perhaps we all can affirm this simple understanding of the holy Trinity:

- there is a God, beyond human understanding, yet whom we somehow experience, who made us and loves us.
- That creative and compassionate God is better understood by us because of the life and ministry of the man Jesus.
- And that God we experience today, caring for us and calling us all to a new life of justice and freedom, of truth and peace, and – above all – to a life of love.

Amen.