

Trinity Sunday

Worship and Doubt

Matt. 28:16-20

A sermon preached at St. Paul's Episcopal Church by the Rev. Richard C. Israel, Associate Rector, on June 19, 2011.

Last Sunday when we celebrated the Feast of Pentecost marked the end of the Easter season. Today marks the beginning of that long green season of the church year called Ordinary Time with its emphasis on growing in Christian living. If the theme of Ordinary Time is growth, why, one might ask, do we begin that season by pondering the mystery of the Triune God? Growth in Christian living seems practical and valuable to everyday life. In contrast, meditating on the imponderable mystery of the Trinity might better be reserved to theologians and philosophers in ivory towers.

The French novelist Antoine de Saint-Exupery may have offered the best explanation of why the church introduces the season of Ordinary Time by pondering the Trinity when he wrote: "If you want to build a ship, don't herd people together to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea." Today we are invited to ponder the "endless immensity" we call God. Perhaps when we are personally caught up in the mystery of God's love, we shall find the passion to work for personal growth in Christian living.

The feast of Holy Trinity can be traced to the reaction of the church to the Arian heresy that led it to adopt the Nicene Creed in 325 C.E. even though it was not part of the official church calendar until 1334. It was especially popular in the Church of England, possibly because of its association with Thomas a Becket, who was consecrated bishop on Trinity Sunday in 1162. If you think by giving you this history lesson I am dancing around the edge of explaining the Trinity, you're right. It's much easier to explain the origin of Trinity Sunday than to explain the doctrine of the Trinity.

If we look to today's readings to give us a clear and detailed exposition of the doctrine of the Trinity, we will not find one. The doctrine of three persons in one God, equal in divinity yet distinct in personality, is not explicitly spelled out in Scripture. In fact, you can search till the cows come home and you won't even find the word "Trinity" in the Bible. Early Christians, reflecting on their own experience of God, arrived at this doctrine. Jesus spoke about the Father who sent him, the Son, and about the Holy Spirit who would come to his disciples after Jesus returned to the Father. Jesus taught that the Father had given him all that he has and that he in turn has given to the Holy Spirit all that he has received from his Father. In this we see the unity of purpose among the three persons of the Divine.

Although the "how" of the Trinity may be beyond our comprehension, I think it is very important to understand the "why". Why did God reveal to us this mystery regarding the very essence of the Holy One? In the first lesson, the story of creation, we hear that we are made in the image of God. The more we understand God, the better we may understand what it means to be fully human.

In the Gospel reading, when Jesus commissioned those less than convinced disciples to teach people of all nations what they had learned from him and to baptize them into his way of life "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit", he ended by saying "I am with you always, to the end of the age". That promise to be with us is an echo of the name by which Matthew referred to Jesus in the account of his birth, Emmanuel, literally "God with us".

Jesus came to show us who God is and how God acts toward all creation. He revealed to us that God is community, that God is not alone, though one. He told us that God is family, not isolated, nor

aloof, haughty, or unsociable. The nature of God is to relate, to love, to companion us. Joseph Dunder put it this way, "God is not sitting on a throne as hard as a diamond, blinding as the sun, cold as crystal, majestic as a dictatorial ruler. God is a life process. God is parent and offspring and their love. That is what Trinity means."

If the Trinity is all about love and we are created in the image of the Triune God, could it be that we discover the fullness of what it means to be human when we invest our lives in loving God and others as we have been loved?

We had a fascinating evening this past Tuesday with friends from Olivet Institutional Baptist Church discussing a provocative book, *If God is Love* by Philip Gulley and James Mulholland. (If you were not able to be there this week, I still encourage you to get the book and join us on the 28th at Olivet for part two of this discussion.) As I read this book I felt indicted as I recalled the ways in which my religious upbringing taught me to judge others who did not have the same understanding of the Bible and of God's will as I did. I realized how easy it is to make faith into a head trip in which adhering to right doctrine becomes the way to win a heavenly prize instead of loving others—even one's enemies—as Jesus did.

I know I am not alone in this. In fact, history is rife with stories of ways in which the church did violence to those who did not meet standards of orthodoxy. Crusades, slavery, witch trials, and the Holocaust all bear witness to the ways in which the church has seen itself as a gatekeeper, using pure doctrine to exclude and demonize others. But Jesus, I believe, invites us to participate in love so that we might discover that the "kingdom of God" truly lies within us. When we pray as Jesus taught us, "thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven", we are asking to be caught up in the loving dance of God. Gulley and Mulholland wrote, "Pure religion sees relationship with God not as the means to an end, but as the answer to our deepest longing—unconditional love and meaningful existence."

Perhaps this divine love is at the heart of Jesus' words "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" are all about. The ultimate test of one's authority is whether it persuades, not forces, others to follow. Think about how Jesus used power. Jesus did not cling to power or use authority to dominate or control others. God's power is self-giving, not self-possessive or self-preserving. Because God is love and we are created in God's image, I believe the doctrine of the Trinity teaches us that we will find the fullness of being alive as we are caught up in the loving dance of God that won't stop until it builds an inclusive community in which it is more important to be reconciled than to be right.

Larry Gillick, a Jesuit priest, commenting on the lessons for Trinity Sunday, warns those who would preach on this day, "We will not be changed much by what we learn from the readings and homily this weekend. We will grow in faith by experiencing human love, forgiveness, faithfulness, and communication in our own lives." Or to paraphrase the concluding line from "Les Misérables", that musical parable about redemptive love, "It is in loving another person that we see the face of God".

In the mystery of God's love, we are the medium through which God has chosen to reach out and show love to the world. Like the disciples who gathered on that mountaintop in Galilee, we know ourselves to be both worshipers and doubters. But like those disciples, God sends us who are made in God's image of unconditional, mutual love to be icons of that love for others. As we give ourselves to this difficult and seemingly impossible task, we will experience the immensity of God's love and discover the joy of living in God's presence.

