

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Today, the first Sunday after Pentecost is named and celebrated as the feast of the Holy Trinity. And it is one of the least favorite days in the liturgical calendar for a preacher. There are several reasons for this: *a)* there are very few references in Scripture to the Trinity to build one's sermon on, *b)* the Trinity is not an event like Christmas, or the Baptism of Jesus, or the Resurrection, *c)* nothing *happens* on Trinity Sunday, and *d)* how does the preacher get the Scripture lessons assigned for this day to "fit" into an explanation/understanding of the Holy Trinity?

Much better and more experienced preachers than I have struggled with this. And the Church has too. It took until the Councils of the early Church, from Nicaea in the fourth century to Chalcedon in the fifth to spell it out. The one God in Three Persons. The relationship of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit to each other. The co-eternity of God. The equality of the Persons. One in Three, Three in One. Uncreated, incomprehensible, in all things and beyond all things. Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier. And these just for starters.

Even St. Augustine, who wrote a whole book on the Trinity once said, "If you don't believe in the Trinity you will lose your soul. But if you try to understand it you will lose your mind." The whole notion of the Trinity sounds pretty abstract. God, we say, is three "persons" in one divine life, and we call this God "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." Even though the masculine language is traditional, the Source of everything is beyond gender.

So, lest you think I am going to blather on with theological jargon that I struggle to understand, I will try and offer some thoughts, not explanations, about the Trinity, and why it is essential to our faith.

Human beings have always tried to understand God, to explain God. And yet, God is too wonderful to be understood in only one way. Too mysterious to be understood at all. A God whose reality can, at best, be approached. Approach is the best we can do. And that's what Isaiah, in the 8th century B.C., tries to tell us in our first lesson, that in God's presence, as he found himself, he didn't know what to do, what to say. He was struck nearly speechless by the majesty, the magnificence, the presence, the holiness of God. He recognized his smallness, his insignificance. And he was awed by the beauty, the loveliness, the melody that filled the space, the angels singing God's praise, "*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory*", the song we know as the *Sanctus*, and sing every week.

This lesson from Isaiah reminds me that one of the ways we can approach God is through music. Which is what our choirs help us do, week in and week out. What Michael and Robert and all these amazing persons behind me show us, lead us, in trying to come near God through hymns, through anthems, is to use their voices to reveal God's mystery, God's glory, God's grandeur, God's majesty. Thank you, members of the choir. Thank you, Michael and Robert.

And the hymns we sing every week are also intended to help us approach God, and are chosen *to reflect the Scripture we read or the theme we celebrate*. So today we sang the Isaiah song ourselves in our entrance hymn 362, *Holy, Holy, Holy*, and will sing a variation of it in 324, *Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence* at communion, and the choir will proclaim God's grandness with their *Te Deum* anthem. And in our final hymn we'll reaffirm Trinitarian understanding with 370, *I Bind Unto Myself Today*. In other words, what we can't necessarily make clear in words, we can approach through music and hymnody.

The idea that God wants to be in relationship with human beings is at the core of the mystery of the Trinity. The Three Persons of the Trinity are in *mutual relationship* and *interconnection* with one another, a relationship of *love* and *reciprocity*, a relationship of *love* and *equality*. Frederick Buechner says the Trinity is "the mystery beyond us, the

mystery among us and the mystery within us... all the same mystery. Thus," he continues, "the Trinity is a way of saying something about us and the way we experience God."¹

And because God lives in relationship, in Trinity, in love, in mutuality, so we too long for *relationship*, for *love*, for *mutuality*. That's how we are wired. That is how God has created us. "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them" (I John 4:16). This is how God longs for us to live. We are meant to live in *community* with others, in communities of love and respect and forgiveness, in households, in families, in church, in our workplaces, in our society, in the world. God wants us to live in communities of love, as God lives in love in Trinity.

In our Gospel lesson we read that Nicodemus came to Jesus in the dead of night asking hard questions about God, about the meaning of life. He came to Jesus because he honored and trusted him, because he was seeking a relationship with Jesus. He was pretty certain Jesus wouldn't dismiss his questions. He trusted that he would be valued and that his queries taken seriously. But his social and religious standing did not allow him to be seen openly consulting the uncredentialed rabbi from Nowheresville. So he came at night to pose his queries. He was testing. He wanted to believe in God, in Jesus, but needed to know more.

And Jesus does take him seriously. Jesus tells Nicodemus that the way to God is to be open and vulnerable and honest, to be receptive and ready for God's limitless possibilities. He tells him that to be born again, to be born from above, is to recognize that God's ways are not humans' ways, that God works in our midst in mysterious and unexplained actions. And since we cannot explain the weather, "the wind blows where it chooses...but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes...", says Jesus, why should we try to explain God? And then he goes on to say that God's generous love for humankind is poured out in God's only Son, and that eternal life is for all who believe.

The Church has given us this lesson today to help us understand the love God has for all of us, manifested by the Trinity. As Church, as Christians, we often have set up obstacles, barriers to God through our words and behavior. Through the centuries we have told some people that they weren't good enough for God, e.g. women, people of color, gays, people of certain ethnic origin, divorced persons, persons with particular illnesses or disabilities... we have tried to circumscribe God's love and generosity. This has happened in every century, in every generation down to the present day. We have drawn the circle narrowly, and tried to limit God's love. And God keeps telling us that God's borders are as far as the eye can see. And then some more. God's love is boundless, for all of us.

I don't think that the most difficult thing we're asked to believe is the doctrine of the Trinity. Oh, it may be the hardest to figure out, but I don't think it's the hardest to believe. I think that the hardest thing you and I are asked to believe is just how much God loves us—as we are—without condition, in fact, in spite of who we are. I think that, truth be told, most of us have a difficult time believing that God could love us—with all our shortcomings and doubts and failures—could love us so completely and outrageously that God would get up on a cross to prove it. But he did.

This is radical news. Really *earth-shaking*. God has come to us as Creator, Redeemer and Life-giving Spirit to love us and help us live in love and faithfulness and witness to the world. God has come to us in community of Three Persons of love to show us how to live with one another. The Trinity gives language to our strongest belief that our God is not merely a God of history, performing mighty acts only in Bible times, but a powerful, on-the-move God of the present and the future, for us and for all the world. That's what the Trinity wants us to understand in our heart of hearts. To live in love. To act in love. To be in love. AMEN.

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking, A Theological ABC*, p. 93.