

Trinity Sunday

Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. 2 Cor. 13:11-13

Trinity Sunday. Trinity Sunday is an anomaly in our liturgical calendar; it doesn't commemorate an event in the life of Jesus and Jesus movement, like Christmas, Epiphany, Easter, or Pentecost, or the season following these major feast days. Nor does it celebrate a person, exactly, or people, as All Saints' does. Trinity celebrates a theological concept developed by our Church forebears in the early days of the church.

As such, as a theological concept, Trinity presents a homelitic challenge. Not only can the Trinity seem pretty abstract and arcane, if we read the ancient theologians, but contemporary theologians struggle with the Trinity, too. What do we mean by a 'three-personed God?'

And the Trinity as imported to the Colonies by the Puritans was not a cheery godhead. The Trinity embodied the grimmest of Atonement theology: the Father God has been offended by the original sin of Adam, so deeply offended and angry that humanity could be redeemed only by the bloody sacrifice of the Son, and by the grace of the Holy Spirit bringing sanctification. A dark and damning vision of the world and, indeed, of God, as punishing, wrathful, and deeply judgmental

I've been reading a book by Gary Wills called **Head and Heart: American Christianities**, in which he rather rapidly traces the history of Christianity in America, with a view to contrasting Evangelicalism or Fundamentalism with Enlightened or Progressive Christianity. He points out that a major hallmark of the arrival of Enlightened religion in America was the denial of the Trinity, the development of Unitarian thought

"Unitarianism rejected the idea of a vengeful God. It disliked human sacrifice of any kind, to say nothing of God sacrificing a member of his own Trinity." (Wills 112)

Of course, you don't have to be a Unitarian to dislike human sacrifice, or the idea that God brought Jesus into the world only to punish him for our sins. I think most of us would share those antipathies.

So what, then, do we make of the Trinity? I always come back, with this question, to the answer my friend the theologian Carter Heyward once gave, “Whatever the Trinity is about, it’s *relational, relational, relational!*”

That is, as I understand it, what the ancients were trying to convey as well. God is not entirely separate from us, remote and inaccessible. God became incarnate, human, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth; then when Jesus no longer bodily walked the earth, God sent the Holy Spirit to reside among us *in community, in connection, in relationship*.

So in fact the concept of the Trinity, the personhood of the Trinity, the relatedness of Creator, Son, and Spirit, is central to our understanding of what we are doing here this morning, or any time we gather as a community of the faithful to worship, to work, to do ministry and mission. We are practicing relationship.

And in the culture we inhabit, a culture that is becoming at the same time more globally integrated and more personally segmented, that gathering has increased and special significance. What do I mean? Well, we live in a world of many marketplaces, a world in which we have unprecedented ability and freedom to explore, to choose, to mix and match ideas, traditions, and practices. 50 years ago, or even 20, how many Americans practiced yoga, just to give one obvious example? We can pick bits and pieces of spiritualities that appeal to us, and put together a worldview that spans continents and millennia.

At the same time, we tend to organize much of our personal lives around our workplaces, our hobbies and sports interests, and perhaps the activities of our children. These may be very rewarding and stimulating associations – I don’t mean to diminish such connections in any way. But they are niche associations of one sort or another – we join with others over a common interest, and may not move far beyond that point of connection.

So, we sample many profound truths, and we encounter many people of similar interests or backgrounds, but our lives perhaps don’t change much. And that can be comfortable enough – change is hard, we all know that. For personal change really to occur, for our lives truly to be transformed, we need complex shared beliefs and practices, community support, and challenge.

Think about reading a bible passage or two at home, picking out ones that comfort us and support our core beliefs. Then think about hearing the scripture proclaimed, as we do here each time we gather for worship, bible passages which we don’t select personally but which are proscribed for us weekly, and to which we are asked to respond *whether we*

like them or not. In the first instance we can select and interpret as we like, and respond as we will. In the second, we draw from the broader resources of our community life in interpreting, and we engage with others as we try to work through a faithful response.

There is nothing wrong with either routine. But the first is unlikely to demand much of us in terms of personal transformation, I think, unless we have extraordinary capacity to challenge *ourselves*. More commonly, it is the encounter with differences of opinion, varieties of belief, alternatives of interpretation that invite, or require, us to stretch, to grow, to change.

Steve and I have both been preaching recently about inclusiveness, about the wideness of God's mercy, God's heart, God's hope and promise for us. We have challenged ourselves to expand our understanding of salvation, and of religious truth, beyond the confines of the Christianity we practice. But we have other challenges, and one of them is to expand and deepen what it means to be a practicing Christian.

Christian spirituality in its fullness expands beyond a set of individual beliefs or meanings. Christian spirituality is a way of life in which we partake of God's word and sacrament, by which we respond to God's gracious presence in our lives, by particular actions. We respond by practices of faith, by struggling to stay together in work and worship, by wrestling with institutional structures, and by occupying the same sacred space week in and week out with those with whom we do not always agree *whether we like them or not*.. And we respond by doing our best to love those same people with whom we do not always agree *whether we like them or not*.

And that response—our attempted obedience to Jesus' command to love our neighbor as ourselves—that response can confront us with difficulties as profound as our attempts to understand Islam or Hinduism — indeed, perhaps more profound, as these are visceral, emotional challenges rather than intellectual ones.

Staying in place, coming regularly to join the same community of faith and practice, requires that we encounter others in all stages of belief and questioning, in all stages of life and personal development, with many and varied needs and desires. We meet and greet one another in the name of Christ, bringing our tender hearts, our dearest hopes and deepest sorrows to the altar with us. We bring our vulnerabilities, our disappointments, our tangled expectations. And we do our best to welcome and honor one another in all our human complexity.

And that, my dear friends, means that nothing in our community of faith is every static, fixed, or constant. None of us individually stays the same: we age, we grow, we

marry and divorce and give birth and have accidents and contract illnesses and diseases, we experience suffering and loss, joy and gain. And as our individual lives evolve, offering ever-new challenge and promise, so does our community.

That's where the Trinity comes in, as the holy model and exemplar of life in Christian community. The doctrine of the Trinity, whatever else it does, proclaims that, like us, God is not static or fixed. God moves and changes as we do, God possesses many faces and many functions. We name those faces and functions variously: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; Creator, Redeemer, Liberator – and so forth. What we mean by these names is that God, like us, exists and works and struggles in relationship – with God's self, as we are in relationship with ourselves, and with others, with us.

And the doctrine of the Trinity speaks as well, to how we are as Church. People who do not practice a liturgical tradition think of liturgical church as static and fixed, routine and unchanging. But we know that's not our experience. The Trinity, the three-personed God-head, holds the difficult and dynamic work of divine forgiveness, justice, and love. And our liturgy forms a discipline, a container, holding the hard and dynamic work of relationship, human forgiveness, justice making, and love.

Whenever the leadership at St John's asks the congregation what you would like the parish to offer you, two answers come back consistently. One is more social events that are not fundraisers; the other, more adult education or programming. In my years here, I've come to believe that the yearning underlying both these answers is for deeper and more complete connections among us. We want to know one another. We want to understand one another. We want to reach out to one another, and be reached out to in return.

Occasionally we've practiced something here –some of you will remember – called one-on-ones. Instead of a postlude after the service, we've asked folks to pick someone they don't know well and talk for ten minutes, still in the pews: talk about why you are at St John's and what your hopes and dreams for the parish might be. I have always found it a great blessing to stand at the back of the sanctuary and observe these conversations– observe the unpredictable pairings that occur and observe how the conversations do not end when we call 10 minutes. We have much to say to one another.

Recently an ad hoc planning team met to begin to talk about what the next chapter may be for our life here at St John's. Our basement is renovated, marriage equality is secured (God willing): two projects into which we have put our hearts and souls over the last several years. What next? Well, stay tuned for news from this planning team, for our

questions to you about what your hopes and dreams are for our common future, for some programs and offerings next fall including, I am sure, another round of those one-on one conversations.

Finally, brothers and sisters ... listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen