

Sermon Trinity Sunday B

Holy Trinity, One God, Come to us, abide with us. Lead us in your path. Create in us a new people. Amen.

In my World Religions classes I used to go to great lengths to tell the students that Jews and Christians and Muslims are all cousins, children of Abraham, our father in the faith, who with Sarah and Hagar were the first to believe in the one God. I made a great deal of the fact that we are all believers in the one, same God! Well, the Christian students were often surprised that they share the same God with the Muslims, and the Muslims and Jews would often frown respectfully when I said that Christians are believers in one God. To many of the Jewish and Muslim students it looked as though Christians had three Gods. The Christians would vigorously assure them that this is not the case, and so another class began!

It's a lively topic in classrooms these days, and has been a lively topic from the first centuries of Christianity. Some of the biggest fights in Christian history have been over the question of the Trinity.

Most of the church councils of the early centuries had as their basic agenda items:

Who is God?

Is Jesus Christ God?

Who is the Holy Spirit?

Is the Christian God the same as the God of the Hebrews?

That's an entire semester of church history in one paragraph. And lest you think that this is just some lofty subject for academics with too much time on their hands, let me tell you that in the first few centuries everybody was getting into the act.

In Alexandria, Egypt, a bustling and exciting port city on the Mediterranean, where people and ideas came and went with the ships, a popular and very smart priest, Arius, started to teach that Jesus was not equal to God. His bishop was annoyed, to put it mildly. Church authorities in Rome were quite annoyed, to put it mildly. In fact, even emperor Constantine was so annoyed that he called a great church council. The result of that council, the creed of Nicea, we will recite this morning. Alexandria was astir with this new theology. We read in [A History of God](#) by Karin Armstrong, that

dock workers were singing little ditties about how the Son was not equal to the Father. This would be equivalent to the teamster's union making up jingles about the error of the trinity. We know about bath attendants who would harangue bathers about the nature and person of Christ. We hear about bakers who, with the customer's change, would give them a theological opinion about the Son not being equal to the Father. These debates in people's houses, in the stores and on the docks were as lively as today's conversations about the Red Sox or the Patriots. Now, even given the fact that this was before cable TV, it is still remarkable how involved people were in what seems like complicated and abstruse theology.

Why were people's conversations so heated? Because people were trying to talk about God in a way that made sense of their experience. They wanted to put words on what they knew to be true from their experience of prayer and worship. There was passion in these conversations because people had a great stake in the outcome. People wanted assurance that they were redeemed. It was crucially important to them that Christ be both human and divine, truly one of them, flesh of our flesh, but truly equal to God. Christ was their

bridge to God, and Christ is ours- reconciling us to God by the blood of his cross. So much was at stake for them- redemption, salvation, having a right relationship with God. This was no academic matter best left to the theologians. Everybody was involved. And so their beliefs were made concrete and given words in our creeds.

But this central Christian experience of who God is, has been only awkwardly contained in our language. We've done the best we could with what we had, the concepts, the words, the philosophy that undergirds the creeds. But notice that the creeds are recited in the liturgy. It is in the experience of worshipping and encountering God that we use our ancient formulas about God. When we baptize, we recite the Apostles' Creed, which is our earliest creed, used at baptisms from the 2nd century. Today we use the creed of Nicea, written in 325. But words are always inadequate, both limited and limiting. Because what we are talking about fundamentally is our experience of God alive and at work among us, especially in our worship together. We come here on Sunday and hear the scriptures read. They speak of God's creation of the universe and God's creating hand in shaping all of us. We hear about God's involvement in our

human history, redeeming us in the midst of our lives. No philosophical concept, or remote divine principle here. But God holding in divine hands the stuff of creation, healing, changing, forgiving, empowering, strengthening, lifting up and casting down. God immersed in our lives, present to save.

And when we come to liturgy we bless bread and lift up a cup of salvation. We recall the saving work of Christ, his offering of his body and blood for our salvation. We come to this table to share in the sacrament, to remember and to make real again Christ's redemption of each one of us.

And we experience in worship an opening of our hearts and lives, our eyes and our ears, something happens to us in this holy place where we gather, this holy ground on which we stand. God is here in this place. And we know it. God the sustainer and sanctifier is making us into a new creation, making of our diversity a unity.

What we struggle so to put into words is our conviction that God is not only an I. Our scripture says: Let us make humans in our image. God is an US. God is a relationship. God is a community. God is love. God is a dynamic, interfacing, interlocking mystery, whom

we experience as creator, redeemer and sanctifier. We affirm our experience by faith in the heart of our prayer but we don't have all the words for it because our experience is far broader and far richer than our language.

Theology was always a very difficult subject for me. Heaven knows, I had enough of it in all my years of schooling, but it never seemed to capture my experience. So I resorted to the mystics, the poets, the pray-ers of the church. I read them more than my theology textbooks because they spoke about their experience of God in ways that I could connect with. They knew that we are standing on holy ground, that any attempt to put words on our experience is limiting, too narrow, misses something in the translation!

But we are human and words are our way of communicating our reality and experience one to another. And so over the centuries we have designed a way for Christians to talk about the dynamism in God and the relationship within God. We call this Trinity. We affirm that whatever our triune God does, it is always about relationship and love. We affirm that the reign of God is about creating new relationships. Wherever love is found, wherever relationships are

being restored and made right, wherever love is reconciling and breaking open with joy into a future of unlimited hope God is there. And St. John of the Cross tells us that in the evening of life, we will be judged on love. Love and relationship will be our judgment. When we meet God we will be asked how we have treated each other, not how we have defined our eternal truths. Since God is a community, so are we because we are created in the image of God. And like the early Christians we are called to the same passion of putting into words our experience of God. We are called to find ways to talk to others about our prayer, about how God is at work in our lives. Different people do that differently, keeping a journal, finding a prayer partner or spiritual friend or a group with whom to speak about our experience of God, reading the experiences of the pray-ers of the church, and praying ourselves.

And there is a way to know that we are not being deceived or led astray in our deepening experience of God. We look at the evidence of our lives. Are we growing in love? Are we treating one another with the compassion of God? Are we entering more deeply into the life of community? Are we being drawn into the circle and

the fire of God's love? Are we willing to grow, to change, to move into the future? Dynamism, love, relationship, renewal, change, religious experience are all part of the presence of God. We are standing on holy ground, my brothers and sisters. Enter with confidence. But enter with awe. God is in this place. And we are God's. What we will become has not yet been revealed. But we are created in God's image to love as God does, without boundaries, without limitations, long after time has slipped away and the dawn of eternity is shining upon us. The God who created us, who redeemed us and is making us holy is drawing us into love, here and now. Today. We are standing on holy ground, indeed.

And so we pray:

May God whose power now at work in us can do infinitely more than we can even ask for or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus now and forever. Amen.