

TRINITY SUNDAY

Jesus said, 'All that the Creator has is mine. For this reason I said that she will take what is mine and declare it to you.' John 16:15

Well, it's Trinity Sunday, and my job is to talk with you about the Holy Trinity. The Big Three. It's a sacrifice, because the epistle today is perhaps my favorite piece of all Scripture.

That is, *suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us*, as Paul wisely and wonderfully tells us. But I bring that verse into my preaching and counseling often, so I'll pass on it today, especially as it has little or nothing to do with the Trinity *per se*.

The Trinity's a challenge. Tough to preach a gripping sermon about a theological principle. So I'm not going to try, too hard, and I'm certainly not going to be very systematic. I'll tell you a few things, and ask some questions.

I've been having an email exchange with Franklyn that's pertinent. He walked home with me two Sunday's ago and said he had some comments about the liturgy (this was Ascension Sunday, the balloon Sunday). "I'll bet you do," I told him.

Franklyn made a couple of observations and then – he always saves the best for the last, "You are denying the divinity of Christ when you have Jesus call God 'his Creator.' Because *in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*. And if Christ is God, how can God create Him?"

I said that I don't consider Jesus of Nazareth identical to the Risen Christ. I said – well, some of this was in email, later – I said that I don't believe we know whether Jesus knew he was divine, and I happen to find him and his life far more helpful and significant to me if he *didn't* know. Then he really was *fully human*.

I will spare you all the ins and outs of our dialogue. Needless to say, neither of us convinced the other. I pledged to Franklyn that I would continue to ponder what we can have Jesus call God that is not gendered (Father) and doesn't question the divinity of Christ, or, to put it another way, the co-equality of the three persons of the Trinity. And I believe Franklyn is reassured that I'm not a crypto-Unitarian.

Here are the things I think it's important to know about the Trinity. First, it's not in the Bible. You will look for it – if you do – in vain. God is there, of course, and Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, whom we hear about today in the Hebrew Scripture as Wisdom – *When God established the heavens, I was there, when God drew a circle on the face of the deep, when God made firm the skies above, when God established the fountains of the deep, when God assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress, when God marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside God, like a master worker; and I was daily God's delight, rejoicing before God always, rejoicing in God's inhabited world and delighting in the human race.*

And Jesus says about the Spirit, *All that the Creator has is mine. For this reason I said that she will take what is mine and declare it to you.*

So the doctrine of the Trinity was derived from Scripture, but it's not explicitly spelled out anywhere. It was worked out in the Third century and classically formulated by the Council of Nicaea in 325, in what we know as the Nicene Creed.

So, as Trinitarians, we believe in God, the Creator – whatever we may mean by that. And we believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of God, whatever we may mean by that. Personally I would say I believe that Jesus loved God more than anyone had previously (or has since) and felt commensurately closer to God than anyone else, and therefore could teach God's vision for us in ways so compelling that the world has never been the same. And that that vision powerfully transformed his followers to the extent that they could only express it in terms of Resurrection from the Dead. And I believe that God's presence continues to move among us here, today, and always, and that presence is what we call the Holy Spirit.

In seminary I could never understand why the early church theologians made such a fuss about the Trinity, and about the precise relationship among Jesus and God and the Spirit. Eventually I figured out – and I did this on my own, I got no help, because it all seemed to go without saying – I figured out that they must have been afraid of being thought to be pagans. After all, the Hebrew people had fought – literally and theologically – for centuries, to uphold their belief in one God as over against the pagan pantheon of one God *for every purpose under heaven*. And now, here they are, talking about *three*. That's why we sing, and say, *three in one and one in three*.

Three persons, or three faces or forms of one person, but not persons in the way we think of people, as individuals. In the ancient world – and they were not stupid, those ancients – *person* was always a communal concept. Persons were always part of something larger than themselves. Hence, the three persons of God.

As I pondered my interchange with Franklyn about the relationship between Jesus and God, I remembered one of the questions in the back of my Theology 101 text. “In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prays to God to take away the cup of suffering. If Jesus is God, who is he praying to, himself?”

Also, I’ve been listening when I drive to a book called **The Abstinence Teacher**, by the local and very funny writer Tom Perrotta. The story is about a health education teacher in a suburban highschool who gets in trouble for failing to teach the abstinence curriculum with proper reverence, and a Born Again ex-druggie soccer coach who coaches her daughter’s team, and who gets in trouble (with the non-abstinence teacher, anyway) for praying with the team on the field after a game. Plus, they are sexually attracted to each other. You can just imagine.

At one point, the born again guy is testifying to the teacher about his faith and trying to get her to accept Jesus. “Why should it matter so much to him whether I believe in him or not?” she asks. “Isn’t he God? If he’s God, why is he so insecure?”

A good question, I thought.

Another of my unsystematic musings about the Trinity had to do with family systems theory, as I understand it from the teachings of Murray Bowen and Rabbi Edwin Friedman. One of their basic tenets is that triangles exist everywhere in human relationships, that they are, indeed, the foundation of interpersonal dynamics. A dyad, a twosome, is relatively unstable, they claim, and a twosome will inevitably draw in a third point, or a third point will insert itself, into the relationship. Tension, they say, exists, and is diffused, along the lines of the triangle.

A very simple example is one person complaining to another about a third party instead of addressing directly the party they’re upset with or critical of. Never happens in church, of course! These are undesirable triangles, and our work – and it’s spiritual work, believe me, is to extricate ourselves from such triangles when we find ourselves in them.

But not all triangles are bad, and not all points of the triangle have to be human, either. I told the bishop recently that one thing he seems not to understand, being a monk, is that a triangle most of us clergy struggle with is the triangle of

marriage, the church and ourselves. That can be a fruitful triangle if kept in balance – it's the balancing part that's tricky.

I would say that the Holy Trinity is our primary, and theological, representation of a fruitful triangle, indeed, a holy triangle. The Trinity is ultimately a mystery, unfathomable by human minds – it says so right on Google search! And so like all mysteries, it leaves us with questions.

What, exactly, is the work of each person of the Holy Trinity, the Holy Triangle? What's the difference between the Risen Christ who, we say, we see in the faces of those around us, and the Holy Spirit? What tensions may exist between the three, and how do they work them out? I'm sure you can think of plenty more questions as well.

But the central truth of the Trinity is this: it's living, it's dynamic, it's creative. And it is all about relationship and interrelationship, interdependence, connection. And that's what we are about as well, or at least, that's what the Big Three *hope*.

Alleluia! Amen

