

The Trinity And The Church

Matthew 28:16-20

June 19, 2011

I.

Most of us are familiar with the story of creation in the Book of Genesis. We might recall what happened on the sixth day when God said, "Let us make man in our image" (1:26). And as we read further we see the term "man" was not limited to the male gender but included all humanity.

But here's the point. God said let "us" create people in "our" image." God spoke in the plural. And today is Trinity Sunday when we celebrate God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We believe that God is all three persons, both separately as divine beings and undivided as one God.

There are, of course, other views. Those who do not believe in the divinity of the Son or Holy Spirit might say God's words reflected the so-called majestic plural; the royal pronoun. But many linguists would tell us the royal pronoun was not a grammatical form until well after biblical times.

In any event, however, today we venture into the mystery of the Trinity. We consider who God *is* as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and what God *does* as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

And sometimes Rectors assign their assistants to preach on Trinity Sunday because it's not an easy subject. Deacon Dave has another commitment today, but I'm sure it's unrelated to this day on the church calendar. And he will be here to preach next week.

So, the first thing I want to do today is give some background about the Trinity. And then, when I get to the part about the Holy Spirit, I will shift gears and talk a little about St. Thomas.

That's because next year we celebrate our thirtieth anniversary here at St. Thomas. We are approaching what could be a turning point in our parish life. The Holy Spirit has been active among us, and it is important to discern and confirm God's will for us as a church.

As a result, we are forming the St. Thomas Advisory Roundtable to consider where we have been, where we are, and where we are going. Its first meeting is Thursday, June 30, and it will continue to meet during the year. Everyone in the church is invited to participate in it.

II.

But let's begin with the Trinity, and today's Gospel reading. Jesus told the disciples to go into the world and make disciples of all nations, and baptize in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. All three were to be involved in the disciples' work.

The Catechism of the Church in the back of the Prayer Book also declares one God as three persons, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (BCP 852). And when this sermon is over we will say the Nicene Creed, which is divided into three parts, one each for the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The point is that these three persons exist as one God, but in a unique way. They are three in one, but not like the sewing machine oil. The Trinity is not a mixture of three ingredients. And the Trinity is not three different gods, nor is it one god wearing three different hats.

And even though we can contemplate aspects of the Trinity, we cannot define God. Some things are mysteries. Other things, however, are known, and from them we can draw some conclusions.

To do that we think outside the box. The term "person" has an unconventional meaning. We must ignore earthly rules of physics. We also disregard boundaries of time and space that limit us, but do not affect God. And there is a different math. One plus one plus one still equals one.

III.

Let's begin with accepting that God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit existed before creation. God has continued from eternity past, and will continue into eternity future. There never was a beginning as we think of it, and there is no end. These familiar ideas of time do not apply to God.

Then we come to the concept of a person. We think of persons as separate people with individual bodies and centers of consciousness. Each person is unique. If there are three people in a room, there are three separate people in the room. They don't all exist together as one person.

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, however, are different. They are three separate but completely united forms of existence. Our laws of physics say three objects cannot occupy the same space at the same time. But the Trinity exists beyond time and space. Our laws don't apply.

It also might help to consider three questions that show us what the Trinity is not. First, is there a hierarchy in the Trinity? Is the Father in charge, with the Son and Holy Spirit as assistants? No, they are co-equal in their being, even though different in what they do.

Second, does only one God carry out three different roles? Does God act sometimes as Father, sometimes as Son, and sometimes as Holy Spirit? Again, the answer is "no." The Father always is the Father only, the Son always is the Son only, and the Holy Spirit always is the Holy Spirit only.

The flip side is the third question. Are the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit three Gods? Again the answer is "no." Jews of the Old Testament always believed in one God. The coming of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit two thousand years ago was not the arrival of two more gods, but rather the revelation of additional aspects of the same God who spoke to Abraham and Moses.

IV.

At this point we have been considering what the Trinity *is*, and we only have scratched the surface. But it's also helpful to consider what the Trinity *does*, which is a bit more practical.

That's because when we imagined what the Trinity *is*, we went beyond time and space, and tried to envision the Trinity "out there." This view of the Trinity is God in heaven, which is a mystery.

But when we reflect upon what the Trinity *does*, then we examine how God is present "down here," with us in our time and space and history, and involved in our lives. This aspect of the Trinity is God in the world, which we can experience.

And they are the same Trinity. The Trinity that exists out there beyond time and space is the same Trinity that acts down here in the world, but we perceive them differently. The mystery of God is unfathomable, but the experience of God is very real.

In this sense we can think of God the Father as the creator from the Book of Genesis. John's Gospel teaches that creation was accomplished through the Word, meaning God the eternal Son. And the Holy Spirit was over the waters of creation.

John then recounts how the eternal Son came into this world in the flesh and walked among us even while the eternal unchanging Son also remained part of the heavenly Trinity. And we grasp that because we already have established that the divine Son could be in two places at once.

And then after Jesus returned to heaven, the Holy Spirit came into this world and remains among us to this day, even though the Spirit also always exists in the eternal heavenly habitations. The divine Holy Spirit also can be in two places at once.

A way of summarizing it would be to know that when we contemplate what God the Trinity *is in heaven*, we experience the wonder and beauty that comes when *we love God*. The first of the Great Commandments says so, and it is the basis of our existence.

And when we think of what God the Trinity *does in the world*, we can experience the joy and comfort of knowing how *God loves us*. The Gospels say so, and it is the basis of our salvation.

V.

So we see that while the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all God in one person, we know God in the world today through the Holy Spirit. And this leads me into the other part of my sermon, which is the Holy Spirit at St. Thomas, and discerning what God wants for our community.

I mentioned that our thirtieth anniversary is next year, and the Holy Spirit has been active here with our Woodland Village ministry, Cursillo, Alpha, the Amazing Praisers, and other ministries.

But reality is around the corner. We can compare our membership size and age with histories of other churches that also are our size and age, and see that changes could be coming.

Many of those churches have not been able to continue in that way indefinitely, and they either have renewed and grown, or else shrunk and declined. This is typical, and we could be in a similar situation. It is something we should address, and in many ways it presents opportunities.

I believe we know that the general policy at St. Thomas has been that we should grow. And I presented some data about St. Thomas, as well as other churches like us, to the Vestry earlier in the year, and the Vestry agreed that we should consider our future in a formal way.

And one of the questions is whether we should try to become just a *bigger* version of what we already are, or a *different* version from what we already are. And perhaps if we do get bigger it is inevitable that we will start to become a little different. These are important questions.

As a result, the St. Thomas Advisory Roundtable is being formed. That name conveniently can be turned into the acronym, START. Patty Hourin has agreed to serve as chair, and the first meeting will be at the church on Thursday, June 30.

And participation in the Roundtable is open to everyone in the congregation in whatever ways you all want to participate. If you want to participate now in the group's regular meetings, please see Patty or me, or anyone on the Vestry.

Or you can join later if you want to think about it, and attend meetings then. There is no deadline. Or you can attend specific meetings as you choose. Materials will be available to help you decide. Meetings probably will be every other week during the rest of the year.

And as the Roundtable gets going there will be additional ways to be involved; perhaps through questionnaires, a suggestion box, or smaller group meetings. This all will be announced, and the Roundtable will keep us informed of its progress.

VI.

We are a church, and are called to do God's work among ourselves and in the community. We seek God's will for us through the Holy Spirit, and the Roundtable will help do that. The church's prayer ministry also will support it, and we want the congregation to be involved.

And Trinity Sunday is a good day to talk about such things. As we think about who God is and what God means to us, it is appropriate to think about what our church is and what the church means to us. And I am confident that if the Holy Spirit leads us we will succeed. *Amen*.