

Sunday Sermon
April 15, 2018
Romans 8:12-17, Matthew 28:16-20
“God in Three Persons?”

Introduction

It is Memorial Weekend, a time for our nation to remember and honor the people who died while serving in our armed forces. Today on the church calendar is Trinity Sunday, a day for Christians to celebrate the magnificent manifestations of the God we worship. Today many believers across the globe have or will sing in worship, as we did, *“Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty . . . God in three persons, blessed Trinity.”*

That hymn was written for Trinity Sunday back in 1820 by Reginald Heber in an effort to help his congregation grasp the enormity of this doctrine about God. Today, nearly 200 years later, ministers still try to find ways to help congregations comprehend God in three persons.

Back when I was on staff of a Presbytery, the council for all the Presbyterian churches in a particular region, I was called to preach one Trinity Sunday at a church with whom I had been working for a while. The church was struggling to survive, and we had been exploring how they would not have to close and send their members to other congregations. So the pastor asked me to come fill the pulpit. It would be an opportunity, he said, to encourage and challenge them.

I decided for the sermon title to do something clever, or so I thought. I took the word “trinity” and inserted a “u” in the middle of it and made a new word “triunity,” thus showing unity of the Trinity, three in one.

It was a busy week, and as I rushed out the door to a meeting, I asked my administrative assistant if she would phone in the text and the title for the bulletin. She relayed the information to the church voice mail, from where the pastor got it and relayed it to the voice mail of the member who typed their bulletin. And somewhere in that process of verbal relays, just like in the old gossip game, the title got altered slightly. In the bulletin that Sunday, the sermon title was printed as two words: “Try” and “Unity.”

That would have been a clever title, also, for talking about the Trinity, except that I was preaching at a small, struggling Presbyterian church on the edge of a city in which the large, thriving Presbyterian church in town was named, you guessed it, Unity Presbyterian Church.

It would be like someone from our Presbytery staff going to preach at a struggling church out from town and the title of the sermon being “Try First Presbyterian.” Needless to say, I had some explaining to do. But then every year

when Trinity Sunday comes, I find myself trying to explain. The doctrine of the Trinity is difficult to describe.

I

A man was in a shopping center one day when he suffered a severe heart attack. It appeared that man was not going to make it, so a minister was summoned to offer prayer for the dying. The minister knelt down by the man's side and asked, "Sir, do you believe in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?" The stricken man looked up in amazement and said, "I'm lying here dying, and you ask me a riddle?"

The Trinity does seem like a riddle. The idea that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit seems like a mathematical mystery. How can one God equal three? Critics say, "You Christians worship three gods, not one. You are tri-theists." One plus one plus one equals three.

Well, no. Our belief in the Trinity asserts we worship one God, a God who creates us, redeems us, and sustains us. To leave out any one of those declarations of who God is would describe someone less than the God we worship. One times one times one time one equals one. Triunity.

II

The idea of a triune God developed when early Christians tried to describe their experiences of God. They experienced God as the creator of all things. They experienced God as a redeemer through the son Jesus. They experienced God as a living presence who created the fellowship of the church and brought comfort as well as communion through Holy Spirit.

So the Trinity was the result of early Christians trying to put into words who God is. And I am guessing that is why you are here today. You are here wondering who God is and how to put that into words. And for that you need more than clever titles or analogies or mathematical equations. They cannot adequately describe a God so great as to create and control the entire universe and at the same time so personal as to know and care for each of us by name and individual concerns.

Do you know the story from India about three blind men who were trying to describe an elephant? One felt a leg and said, "It's thick and sturdy with rough skin, like a tree. One felt the tail and said, "No, it's long and frayed on the end, like a rope." The third man felt a tusk and said, "No, it's smooth and polished, like a piece of fine wood." They could not see that each was experiencing only a part of something much bigger.

Our descriptions will always be partial. God will always be greater than any names or titles or words we use. A God we could fully understand would not be the true God. As Evelyn Underhill says, if the reality of God were small enough for us to grasp, God would not be great enough to be adored.

III

Back in 1820 when Reginald Heber wrote his hymn, *Holy, Holy, Holy, . . . God in three persons, blessed Trinity,*” his superior, the Anglican Bishop in England, said that the time was not right for such a hymn, the church was not ready for it.

It would be years later when the hymn would be acclaimed, and not by a church leader or a theologian, but by a poet, the British Poet Laureate Alfred Lord Tennyson. Tennyson called it “the world’s greatest hymn.”

That is the way it works, isn’t it? Ministers try to come up with ways to help you understand the concept of the Trinity. And then comes the poet who shows us: The Trinity is not about names or numbers or gender. It is not a static theological doctrine.

The Trinity is a narrative of acts of love on our behalf, an unending story of relationship.

- God loves us so much to create us in God’s own image to be in communion with God.
- God loves us so much that when we broke that communion, God sent the Son Jesus, to save us from our brokenness and restore us in the relationship.
- And then that Son Jesus loves us so much to promise, “I will not leave you orphaned. I will send to you an Advocate, the Comforter, the Holy Spirit.”

Conclusion

God will always be greater than our limited vision and our limited analogies. Our descriptions will always fall short. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, then we will see face to face. Now we know only in part; then we will know fully, even as we have been fully known.

But this much we know: We do not worship three gods. We worship one God who is our Creator, our Redeemer, our Sustainer. To leave out any one of those declarations would be to describe someone less than the God we have experienced, the God we worship, the God to whom we give testimony.

So it is okay if we cannot understand or explain the mystery of the Trinity. What is important for us this Memorial Weekend is to seek to be in relationship with this One who seeks and calls us to communion. And to worship and give glory to this great God.

So glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost.
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end.

Amen. Amen.