

One God – Three Persons
Matthew 28:16-20
June 11, 2017 – Trinity Sunday

It's the Sunday after Pentecost. On the church calendar, we call it Trinity Sunday. Now, I tell you the Holy Trinity is the biggest mystery in all of Christianity, as our doctrine states: I believe in one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. What's that all about – one God, three persons? Still, as strange as the doctrine sounds, I tell you the doctrine of the Trinity is the reason I'm a Christian.

Theologians through the centuries have struggled to explain the Trinity. The official church doctrine states that there are three persons of the same essence – three persons, but all made of the same “stuff.” That seems “clear as mud.” Some of you may have heard that Saint Patrick used the three leaf shamrock to explain the trinity – three leaflets, but all part of the same leaf. Others drawing on a similar biological model have tried the metaphor of the tree – one tree with roots, branches, and leaves; but still one tree which could not be a tree without all three.

Perhaps more helpful is the statement that there is steam, water and ice. It's all the same substance, but it looks and behaves entirely differently; and, in fact, that same substance can move back and forth between states – steam to water to ice and back. I prefer the model that states: To my mother, I am a son; to me wife, I am a husband, to my daughter, I am a father. I am only one person, but I fill three very different, distinct roles.

Still, it is most important that we recognize that all of the above are simply models, metaphors, paradigms to understand and explain that which is beyond our comprehension. I once told a college class that the Trinity was simply a model for God. One of my students took major issue. He all but stood up in class and shouted “Blasphemy,” and, indeed, he did feel that my statement was blasphemous. But I went on to explain. . .

God is infinite and ultimate. We humans cannot fully understand the infinite. How can we wrap our minds around something that goes on forever – having no end? How can we conceive of something for which there is nothing greater? The visionary scientist, August Mobius, in the mid-1800's used what came to be called the Mobius Loop to explain infinity. You take a strip of paper, put a half twist in it, and attach the ends together. The result is a figure with only one side and one edge, both of which have no end. I'll leave it to your judgment whether this is an apt model for God who has no end.

But setting aside the infinite and ultimate God – let's look at two other traits for the deity. Theologians have been known to debate: is God transcendent or immanent? Is God transcendent – beyond creation, above creation, the creator who has made all that is and rules/guides creation from afar? Or, is God immanent, a part of creation, working within creation, at the center of creation? I

was once asked that question in a graduate level Systematic Theology class; and I replied – both!!! My professor responded - you can't have it both ways. God is either apart from creation or within creation. God cannot be both. I replied, the Holy Trinity allows me to have it both ways. I can worship God, the Creator of all that is, who is above and apart from the created order; and at the same time, I can be in an intimate relationship with the Spirit of the Risen Christ who walks beside me and who dwells within me to give me power, strength, courage, and most of all love. Yes, the Holy Trinity allows me to conceive of a God that is both transcendent and immanent at the same time. My God is that great.

Furthermore, it's only through a relationship with a God that is that great, that all-knowing and also all-present, that we can truly experience the tremendous love of God; and then go forth to share that love. And this brings me to the brief but hugely important Gospel Lesson for today. It's called "the Great Commission." Jesus tells his followers: "Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them everything that I've commanded you."

So what does Jesus want? (No "want" is too soft a word.) What does Jesus call us to teach to all the nations, to all the people, to everyone? In a word – *agape* love. Jesus calls us, his followers to go, to spread the Good News of God's Amazing Love. Friends, I don't think I can find a single teaching of Jesus – thirty three parables, other stories, healings, real life examples; I don't think I can find a single one of them that does not ultimately relate to love – love of God and/or love of neighbor. That's what Jesus was about. "God so loved the world. . ." and Jesus is the very personification of that love.

Today's Gospel Lesson is the Great Commission, but the teaching is the Great Commandments: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself." and, yes, every human being on this planet is your neighbor. That's the message that Jesus has commissioned us to teach; that's the message that Jesus has commissioned us to live.

Then there is the other part of the commission – Go to all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Friends, I don't think baptism is a ticket to heaven. I do believe that unbaptized people still get into heaven. I also don't think baptism is a magical washing away of our sinful nature. People who are baptized still commit sins; and sometimes atrocious sins. But I do believe baptism is hugely important; because, in baptism we open ourselves to accept that Holy Spirit (or what I like to call that Spirit of the Risen Christ), we open ourselves to allow that Spirit to dwell within us. We open ourselves to the strength, the power, and the love of that Spirit; and we open ourselves to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Baptism forms a bridge, a link, however you want to picture it – baptism cements our relationship with God in Christ; and nothing, no nothing is more important than that relationship.

Now in the United Methodist Church, we baptize babies. Indeed we baptize babies, because we believe that Spirit is so powerful that it will form that relationship, even with those who are unaware; and we call that prevenient grace. But more than that, we baptize babies because the parents, sponsors, those who bring the child forward pledge with the help of the congregation to nurture the child so they may continually grow in that relationship; and finally, when the child achieves an age where they can rightly make decisions for themselves, we ask that youth to confirm the pledge, the acceptance of the Spirit that was made on their behalf at their baptism. We did that last week; we call it confirmation.

And so, Jesus calls us to go, to make disciples of all nations – baptizing; bringing the people into loving relationship, into discipleship with him. And our lesson ends with that most important promise: “I will be with you always – to the end of the age.” That’s love – love that will never die, love that will be with us in the good times and the bad, in the happy times and the sad. That’s the greatest love the world has ever known. That’s the love of God – Father, Son and Spirit. Thanks be to God for the Holy Trinity – One God in Three Persons.

Let us pray. . .

Most holy Lord,
Lead us and guide us,
that we might experience your great love,
and then, that we might go forth to share your love
with all nations, with all people, at all times and in all places.
Amen.