



Sermons from First Presbyterian Church of Ann Arbor

“Tangling with the Trinity”
The Rev. Brewster H. Gere
Trinity Sunday
June 7, 2009
Romans 5:1-5 and 8:12-17

Today is Trinity Sunday. It is the Sunday designated on the Church Calendar to focus upon the mystery of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, that is, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

One distinguished churchman was overheard saying that preachers with any sense would call in sick on Trinity Sunday. Dorothy L. Sayers, known to numbers of people a generation ago as a superb mystery story writer, was also a theologian of note. She once wrote that to the average churchgoer the mystery of the Trinity means “The Father is incomprehensible, the son is incomprehensible, and the whole thing is incomprehensible. Something put in by theologians to make (religion) more difficult—with nothing to do with daily life or ethics.”

Why, then, did I not call in sick this morning or at least ask one of your other pastors to preach? The reason is that throughout my ministry, every Trinity Sunday I have taken to heart the story of a young minister who served a country church and who maybe thought of himself as a card-carrying Trinitarian, as I think of myself, which in turn made him feel compelled to preach on the doctrine of the Trinity annually. Predictably, his efforts were met with the usual resounding silence from most members of the congregation, something ministers come to expect when they venture into the territory of church doctrine. But he kept up his annual exercise of preaching about the Trinity because there was one elderly man in his congregation who took notice of his efforts. After each sermon on the Trinity, this theologically astute and very kind layman would say to his minister: “Young man, you do not completely grasp the doctrine of the Trinity quite yet, but I suppose no one ever does. Nevertheless, I do want to say that I appreciate your tangling with the Trinity every year.”

Although this is not a country church, and although I am no longer a young minister, and although I still do not completely grasp the doctrine of the Trinity, today I am pleased to have the opportunity to tangle with the concept. I do this not to be perverse or to live in the land of obscurity begging for you to say “So what?” after the tangle. Rather, I tangle with this hard-to-comprehend doctrine because I believe you are astute enough to help untangle some of its complexities with me, to the end of our seeing God’s three faces more clearly. I tangle with this hard-to-comprehend doctrine with the hope that in the tangle, dead doctrine will be revealed as living fact, and living fact will lead to deepened faith.

While the Trinity is not specifically stated in the Bible as such, hints are often dropped. Both readings from the Book of Romans, which serve as today's scriptural basis for the sermon, lead us to realize that God is present in three forms, what we know as the three persons of the Trinity.

If we Christians did not believe in God as three equal but distinctive persons, the way we worship and believe would be completely different from the way it is now. We would not baptize people in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. We would not say the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed in the forms we do now. The Doxology would not exist to be sung after the Offering nor would we ever sing the Gloria Patri after the Assurance of Pardon.

From the earliest days of the Christian Church's existence, the Trinity has been considered the primary and distinctive aspect of the Christian conception of God. If we did not believe in God as three equal but distinctive persons, our understanding of God would suffer. That is why, when people ask me what I believe as a Christian, among the first things I say is that I believe in a triune God, that is, a God who exists not only as a single entity but with three distinct characteristics.

Stay with me now for one sentence while I lay out the Trinity in a stark form: In the being of the one eternal deity whom we call God, there are three eternal and real distinctions called Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Now, before I break the 11th Commandment in the preacher's Bible—which is "Thou Shalt Not Bore!"—I wish to have you join with me in thinking of the Trinity in several ways. Think of how God has come to us in the form of a perfect human. This is Jesus. Yet the one who sent the Son still remains God. God is also known as the Holy Spirit who opens our hearts to faith in Christ. But God still remains God throughout all his ways of working and in all his forms. By having God come to us in three persons, we are able to know God more fully: as the author of life, as a self-giving and loving human, and as the Holy Spirit who motivates us to love both God and each other.

Remember the message embedded in the Time with the Children. Think of the compound H₂O, two parts hydrogen, one part oxygen. In a frozen state H₂O is known as ice. In a liquid state it is known as water, and as a vapor, it is steam. Yet the compound H₂O still retains its identity in each state. Likewise, an egg is composed of white, yolk and shell. Or think of a candle with its tallow or other substance it is made of, its wick and the air that brings it to life. All are essential in making light. Think of yourself and the roles you play in life: mother, wife, neighbor; grandfather, father, worker; son or daughter; student, church member. Yet you are still one person.

St. Augustine says the Trinity is like the memory, understanding and love which spring from the being of one person. Another person compares the three person of the Trinity with the sun, the rays of the sun and heat generated by the sun. Another suggests the analogy based on a projector and screen. The light (God the Father) shines through the colored slide (Jesus the Son) to cast an image (the Holy Spirit) on the screen (the Church).
Rachel Henderlite, *A Call to Faith*, John Knox Press, pp. 105-109

Giving Dorothy Sayers her say in her attempt to describe the Trinity she called incomprehensible (as I said at the beginning of the sermon), she attempted to illustrate the Trinity from her frame of reference as an author. Her explanation is that the author (representing God) conceives a plot and main character (Jesus) for a novel. This gives us two factors—the mind of the maker and the concept in the mind. Then, in the writing of a novel, these two factors achieve an independence, a spirit of their own (the Holy Spirit), often taking charge of the writer and leading the writer in directions not originally anticipated.

Over the years, symbols also have played a large part in explaining the Trinity. One is three intertwined circles with a triangle superimposed over them. The triangle signifies the all-encompassing nature of God. The rings represent the three-ness of the Godhead.

Stated another way: you and I have a life created by God. We journey on the path of life created by God, accompanied by Jesus, our companion, our friend. During the journey we are inspired by the Holy Spirit to take new roads that give meaning to life rather than plodding down one created by our own making.

Albert Einstein once said, “The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious... Whoever can no longer wonder, no longer marvel, is as good as dead.” That which is mysterious, including the Trinity, which is God’s way of fully revealing the Godhead in three persons, must be tangled with. It is by such tangling with the Trinity, just as it is by looking at ourselves in a mirror from a number of angles that we find this: despite our imperfections, despite our physical and spiritual warts, the love of God the Father, the grace of Jesus Christ the Son, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit are with us all, promising us love, forgiveness and life eternal.

That love, that forgiveness and life eternal are promised to us again this Lord’s Day at the Lord’s Table. So come to the Table this morning at the invitation of Jesus to meet God in three persons, the blessed Trinity.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.