May 26, 2013 – Trinity Sunday

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Today we're celebrating Trinity Sunday. This has also historically been considered by many to be the feast day of associate priests, curates, and a few unlucky seminarians because this is the day on which no experienced priest in his right mind would want to preach.

Apparently preaching on the subject of the Trinity is hard, but since I'm not that experienced a priest I'm going to give it a shot anyway. I remember the first time I had an opportunity to give a sermon on this day. I was up in New Hampshire doing my summer internship between my second and last years at seminary. We used to meet up every week with a few of the other clergy in town to talk about the lectionary readings for that day and to share our insights. I don't remember what was actually said about the readings for that day, but I do remember the other clergy present advising me in the strongest terms to talk about ANYTHING else but the Trinity.

I believe the exact words were something like, "Just don't go there! Talk about the Gospel instead. No one will care!"

Well, I care.

When we profess our faith in the Nicene Creed we say, "We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty," "We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God," and, "We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life."

In the sacrament of Holy Baptism we say, "I baptize you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

We Anglicans are not that big on orthodoxy for orthodoxy's sake. Our theology has been termed "loose" and "wishy washy" by some, and our doctrinal stances have always been subject to interpretation and re-interpretation over the centuries. But one of the things that we stand firm on is the Doctrine of the Trinity. It's important to us as Anglicans, and, I believe, it's important to us as Christians.

While I was in seminary, both Michael and I were very fortunate to be taught Systematic Theology by Archbishop Peter Carnley, retired Archbishop of Perth and former Primate of Australia – basically their presiding bishop. For those of you who don't know, Systematic Theology is a theological discipline that attempts to create an orderly, rational, and coherent account of the Christian faith. I personally feel that that's a bit like herding cats, but it has certainly helped to shed light on things over the centuries.

Professor Carnley was not only a great guy – much more laid back than all of his titles would seem to indicate – but he was a wonderful theologian and a skilled teacher. He spent a lot of our class on the Doctrine of the Trinity, and our Anglican interpretation of it. Somewhere in one of his lectures on the Trinity, some light was indeed shed. You could almost see the word balloons above my classmates' heads that said "AHA! I get it!"

Since it took him the better part of forty years for Professor Carnley to learn what he knew, and most of a semester to condense it down and teach it to us, I won't go into all of the details. Besides, I'm not sure I fully understand them myself. Ask me again in forty years. The AHAs in my class were more of the nature of something that was understood on a deep level and mostly bypassing the cerebral cortex.

The truth is, Trinity is one of those elusive concepts that is simply unexplainable. It's truly a mystery. And like similar ideas such as Love, or Justice, or Grace, it can only be explained by its effects. As the author Nicholas Sparks puts it, "Love is like the wind; you can't see it but you can feel it."

Well, most of the time we can grasp the obvious effects of Love, Justice, and Grace, but what are the visible effects of the Trinity? In order to understand more of that, I do have to give you a nutshell version of what Professor Carnley taught us.

The Doctrine of the Trinity goes back to the first Ecumenical Councils of the Church in the 4th and 5th centuries. In those days 'ecumenical' meant a gathering of the leaders of the great centers of the eastern and western Church, such as Rome, Antioch, Constantinople, and Alexandria, rather than different denominations like it does today. At these councils, bishops wrangled over doctrine and heresy.

The Doctrine of the Trinity was argued over and refined, and pretty much came into its final form at the end of the 4th century under the leadership of three Eastern bishops, called the Cappodocian Fathers. In case you're taking notes, they were Basil the Great of Caesarea; his brother, Gregory of Nyssa; and Gregory of Nazianzus. I only bring them up because our Anglican theology owes a lot to that early Eastern Orthodox thought.

The key lies in their characterization of the concept of a person, or personhood. Very simply, to the Cappodocian Fathers, a person does not equal an individual in the way we think of today. A person equals someone who is in relationship with someone else.

They then took this concept a step further to explain that the Trinity is three persons who are eternally and perfectly in relationship with one another. I've left out enough details to fill a textbook on Trinitarian theology, but that's enough to start to figure out what this all means for us.

The bottom line is that God doesn’t just approve of relationships, God IS relationship. In fact, the Trinity is the prototype of all relationships. And for Christians, that relationship has been extended to us, through Jesus Christ. We have been invited into the perfect union of the Trinity forever at our baptism. This is an unbelievable gift, but it also carries great responsibility.

This responsibility, this challenge to us, is to model every relationship after the perfect relationship of the Trinity. Anything less would be to fall short. But, unfortunately, we are a flawed, fallen race and our relationships DO often fall short and are in need of fixing.

The first relationship to repair is our relationship with God. They say confession is good for the soul. This is more true than whoever writes these clichés may know. Confession is good for the soul because it restores our relationship with God, who is always waiting for us to repent and turn back to him. And a restored relationship with God is the jumping-off place to start to restore our other relationships.

Once we are reconciled with God, the next relationship to work on is the one between us and ourselves. I know from personal experience that few people are as unkind to me as I am to myself. I say things to myself that I wouldn't dream of saying to someone else – even someone I didn't like or didn't agree with. But years of beating up on myself, and being beaten up on by others, have left me with a lot of tough scar tissue – so tough that I hardly notice when I'm being mean to myself. My spirit winces under the scars, though.

Unfortunately, his is a hard nut to crack because our society doesn't teach us to love ourselves – especially in the Midwest. That would be egotism or narcissism, wouldn't it? Like with physical scars, the only way to get through them is to gently and carefully massage the scarred place until the scar tissue breaks up. It's only then that your relationship with yourself can be restored to health again.

It's from this place of health that we can begin to restore our relationship with others. This doesn't mean just the people closest to us. We are called to be in relationship with our neighbors, and that means everyone. We are called to open ourselves up in love to friend, enemy, and stranger alike.

And not just a passing relationship, either. We are called to open our hearts to them and forgive them and be reconciled with them. It's pretty easy to love someone who loves you back. It's harder to love someone who hates you and wishes you ill. However, Jesus is pretty clear about that in the Gospel.

This relationship restoration project is not necessarily a linear progression, though being reconciled with God is a good place to start. We should be working on all three of these relationships all the time and letting each breakthrough in one help to deepen the other two.

It is in restoring our relationships, in loving God, loving ourselves, and loving our neighbors, that we see the mysterious Trinity in action. This is the perfect union, the perfect love relationship of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit being recreated on earth.

If I try too hard to fully understand the mystery of the Trinity, how three persons could be one God – not three gods and not one God with three natures, but one God - my head starts to hurt. My head can't get around it.

But our hearts can, because our hearts understand perfect love. Listen to your heart. Through it, the Holy Spirit is telling us that we are all beloved children of God, adopted forever through Christ into the perfect family of the Trinity – that same Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.