**May 31, 2015 – Trinity Sunday**

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Happy Trinity Sunday, and the first day of the season after Pentecost! So, problematic as it is, it’s only fitting that we talk about the Trinity a bit this morning. Although the doctrine of the Trinity goes back almost to the beginning of the Church, the Feast of the Trinity only goes back about eight hundred and fifty years – to Thomas Becket who, after he was consecrated as Archbishop of Canterbury in 1162 decreed that the Sunday following Pentecost should be dedicated as a feast day in honor of the Holy Trinity. Fun fact – Thomas was consecrated as ABC only one day after he was ordained a priest. Talk about the clerical fast track!

But back to the Trinity. The concept of the Holy Trinity defies explanation, which is what makes it problematic. I could stand up here for hours talking about it and all that I would achieve is to tie myself up in theological knots. It’s truly a mystery. But mystery or not, it still fascinates me.

It’s kind of like a black hole. As I understand it, which admittedly is the astronomical understanding of an opera singer, you can’t actually see a black hole because at its center the gravitational pull is so strong that it even sucks photons into it. But you can see all around it – its effects and its influences. And you can learn a lot about a black hole by what you can see.

The same is true for the Trinity. Here’s Wikipedia’s description:

*The Christian doctrine of the Trinity (defines God as three consubstantial persons, expressions, or hypostases: the Father, the Son (Jesus Christ), and the Holy Spirit; "one God in three persons". The three persons are distinct, yet are one "substance, essence or nature". In this context, a "nature" is what one is, while a "person" is who one is.*

See what I mean? It’s so simple that it’s complicated. And talking about the Trinity isn’t helped by the fact that Bible passages about it are scarce. It’s implied here and there, but the only place in the New Testament where we hear the familiar Trinitarian formula is Matthew 28:19, as part of the Great Commission: *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit…”*

The Lectionary folks throughout the years must have torn their hair out trying to figure out what Gospel passages to use for Trinity Sunday!

So let’s look all around the Trinity to try to find out what it has to tell us. When I was in Seminary, I had the good fortune to be introduced to a wonderful book called *Being as Communion*, by John Zizioulas, who is an Eastern Orthodox Metropolitan, or bishop. One of the main points that he talks about is the personhood of the Trinity as defined by the Cappadocian Fathers in 381 at the First Council of Constantinople.

What the Cappadocians laid out and Zizioulas refined was that the three members of the Trinity, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, are three individual persons in one being, and their personhood is defined as those who are in relationship with one another and who communicate with one another.

Now we’re getting somewhere! At least somewhere that doesn’t make my head hurt to think about. Relationships and communication – that’s what we’re all about as humans, and especially as humans who gather together as the Body of Christ.

So now, bearing that in mind, let’s look at our Gospel passage from John. The story begins with Nicodemus, who is a high ranking Pharisee, coming to see Jesus under the cover of night. John was always playing around with images of light and darkness, and there’s a certain irony about a learned man of God being in the dark, so to speak. And what Jesus tells him about being born again IS kind of confusing, especially if you look at it the way Nicodemus does – through his earthly experience only.

One interpretation of this passage is that Jesus is being deliberately obtuse in order to make a point about the true ignorance of the Pharisees. But although Jesus’ relationship with most of the Pharisees in the Gospel of John is anything but friendly, there are two who ARE his friends – Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus.

Another interpretation is that Jesus is paying Nicodemus the compliment of assuming that he will understand what Jesus is trying to say without his having to couch it in a parable. Then, rather than this conversation being sarcastic and snarky, it becomes an honest conversation between a teacher and a student, or between God the Son and one of us. In other words, it establishes a relationship and communication. Personhood.

We don’t know if Nicodemus finally gets it or not. The last we hear from him is his question, “How can these things be?” Here Jesus does gently chide him, but then he answers him, at length, ending with two of the most famous verses in the entire New Testament:

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

And:

*Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

God loved the world and God sent his Son to save the world. God opened himself up to us, his imperfect, messy, screwed up critters, because he loved us. Because he LOVES us. And he didn’t just love us from afar. He became one of us and opened the perfect union of the Trinity up to us, as his children. He establishes a permanent relationship and communication with us. Paul puts it best in the passage we heard from Romans 8:

*For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ…*

This is pretty huge!

And, to follow in Jesus’ footsteps, he wants us to open ourselves up, too. Open ourselves to God and to each other. God has extended the invitation and Jesus delivered it in person, and the Holy Spirit gives us the voice and the words to be in communion with the Trinity and with each other. The only rub is that we have to choose that communion over our sometimes more comfortable solitude.

But that’s the tricky part. Sometimes it’s easier to keep nice thick walls up around ourselves rather than be vulnerable to potential hurt from outside. The words of one of my favorite Simon and Garfunkle songs, *I Am a Rock*, sums this up pretty well:

*I've built walls,*

*A fortress deep and mighty,*

*That none may penetrate.*

*I have no need of friendship; friendship causes pain.*

*It's laughter and it's loving I disdain.*

*I am a rock, I am an island.*

And then in the last verse:

*I have my books*

*And my poetry to protect me;*

*I am shielded in my armor,*

*Hiding in my room, safe within my womb.*

*I touch no one and no one touches me.*

*I am a rock, I am an island.*

*And a rock feels no pain;*

*And an island never cries.*

This is most of us, at one time or another. It seems like it’s a natural instinct, to protect ourselves against being hurt. But in protecting ourselves from pain, we’re also closing ourselves off from joy. And here is Jesus telling us, and showing us by example, to do just the opposite, just as he told Nicodemus. Allow ourselves to leave the safety of our walls. Open ourselves up to God’s love and peace and joy in our lives. Open ourselves up to each other, too, so we can be in true communion with one another.

Today, as you receive the bread at the communion rail, try a little experiment. Let that little wafer create the tiniest opening in the shield wall around your heart. Let that opening expand just a little bit to include the people on your left and on your right, and in front and behind you. Let it expand even a little further to include the communion of saints sharing that bread with you, past, present, and future. And finally, expand it to include the whole world, because it’s there that you’ll find Jesus waiting for you, holding his arms out to you to draw you into the perfect family of the Trinity as his brother or sister, as a child of God.

Rest there a while, knowing that you are in the presence of God’s perfect love, and try to remember what that feels like whenever you feel the need to put those walls back up. Because you will – we all will at some time or another – but I guarantee that lowering them will be easier the next time.

I want to close with a piece that Bishop Steven Charleston wrote just last night, which speaks to this subject really well:

*Trust is the key that unlocks the door. In each of our lives there come those moments when we must take a first step. However much we have studied and planned, hoped and imagined, there are realities we cannot predict or control. In the end, we can only take a chance, moving forward by the instinct of our faith. Life changing choices are always a risk. It is for this reason that the Spirit stands beside us. When the path before you is unclear, listen and listen deeply. Seek the word of an ancient wisdom. Trust the love of God in all things. The first step will still be yours, but you will never walk alone.*

Amen.