**June 15, 2014 – Trinity Sunday**

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Today is Trinity Sunday, the most feared Sunday of the entire Liturgical Calendar. Actually, most people don’t fear it at all - just the people who have to preach on it. Last year I mentioned that both Michael and I had been fortunate enough to be taught Trinitarian theology in seminary by a guy by the name of Archbishop Peter Carnley, who is both extremely knowledgeable and who had a practical way of explaining these tricky concepts so that it was at least graspable by his students – as graspable as this mystery could ever be, that is.

But we were also lucky enough to be students of the Canon Historiographer of the Episcopal Church, Father J. Robert Wright, or J-Bob, as we all called him behind his back. Father Wright (as we called him to his face) who has since retired, was one of the Church History professors at General, and taught early Church history, otherwise known as Patristics.

Many people had a hard time with Father Wright’s teaching style. He was fairly elderly and stooped over, and he read to us from his extensive notes, which he had provided us with beforehand so we could read along. A lot of people thought he was a boring old windbag, but Michael and I really enjoyed his class. Michael was even one of his teaching assistants in our last year. He also gave me my one and only A+ on a paper I wrote for his class, and bragged about me to the Bishop of the ELCA Synod of New York, so I tend to remember him fondly. He’s a very sweet man and has probably forgotten more about the early Church than anyone else ever knew.

As I said, Father Wright taught Patristics, which is seminary-speak for the activities of the early Church Fathers (hence the word “patristics”) and Mothers, and the actions of the first seven Ecumenical Councils when a lot of our Church doctrine was hammered out. One of those doctrines was the nature of the Holy Trinity.

The reason I bring up Father Wright was that he liked to use a rather silly, but effective, illustration for the relationships within the Trinity. This is one of those things that had become legendary over the forty years that Father Wright had taught at General.

One of the 4th century theologians who helped hammer out the doctrine of the Trinity was a fellow named Gregory of Nanzianzus, who was Archbishop of Constantinople and one of the three Cappadocian Fathers. He coined the term “*perichoresis*” to describe the Trinity, and this was what Father Wright tried to illustrate.

**Call for volunteers among the kids to demonstrate.**

The word *perichoresis* is a Greek word, naturally, since most of the early Church fathers were trained in Greek universities. “*Peri*” means “around” and “*choresis*” comes from one of the Greek words for “dance” – “*choreuo*” – the word from which we get both “chorus” and “choreography”. So *perichoresis* means literally to dance around one anothe. Father Wright’s demonstration was silly, but it stuck in everyone’s mind.

This word aptly illustrates the Trinity, the early theologians said. Three separate people in one dance, who are constantly moving in relationship with each other. And it’s into this dance, this eternal relating to one another, that we have been invited by the grace of God through Christ.

That’s why the Trinity is important to us. Sure, I suppose it would be an interesting theoretical theological concept and all, but not all that accessible to us if we hadn’t been invited to the dance. But we were. We are adopted, or grafted, into the holy family of God.

So we finally get to today’s Gospel.

*The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*

This is the very end of Matthew’s Gospel – the last five verses. It’s what’s called the Great Commission, since Jesus is commissioning his disciples to continue his work to the ends of the earth. “When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted,” the text says.

The word used for doubt in this case is different from the word used in the Doubting Thomas story, and it’s an important difference. The word is “*distadzo*” which, like perichoresis, is a compound word made up, in this case, of *dis*, which means two, and *stasis*, which means to stand. So it literally means to stand in two places, or to waver or vacillate. It’s only appears one other time in the New Testament, in Matthew 14. It’s the story of Peter getting out of the boat when Jesus calls him, and walking on water until he begins to doubt and starts to sink.

There are a lot of parallels in the two stories – stories that show the disciples to be just as human as we are. In each, Jesus appears in an almost supernatural setting. In both, the disciples (or just Peter) move toward Jesus at his calling, but in both, they start to second guess themselves. And in both, Jesus comes to them in their weakness and takes their hands.

But then this story takes it a step further. Rather than just rescue the disciples from their own wavering, Jesus gives them new marching orders. “I have been given all authority in heaven and earth,” he says. “Therefore, go out and make disciples of all nations.” The conjunction, “therefore,” is very important. It’s a cause and effect word. Because Jesus had authority over everything, he can send his followers out in his name to bring the whole earth into the Kingdom of God through baptizing and teaching.

Well, that’s a pretty tall order. So he also reminds them that even though he’s going to the Father, he’s always with them, too. He makes it personal for them. Which brings us back to the Trinity.

The actual doctrine of the Trinity came long after Matthew wrote his Gospel. For that matter, there aren’t all that many true Trinitarian references anywhere in the New Testament. I’m pretty sure that this Gospel and today’s reading from Second Corinthians were included in the Revised Common Lectionary today precisely because they’re the closest we get. But that doesn’t mean that the concepts weren’t born out of all those writings we have come to know as the New Testament.

In this case, Matthew’s Great Commission fits perfectly into the best understanding that I have of the Trinity – that of an eternal co-relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – and the hope we have been given by being invited into that loving relationship forever. Because that’s what the Trinity means to me – love and hope.

By sending his disciples out into the world to teach and baptize, Jesus is telling us that the whole world is invited into an eternal family relationship with God. And, starting with those disciples, he’s telling us that we are the ones who get to do the inviting. It’s not a chore, it’s a privilege – a perk of being members of the family.

Jesus’ Great Commission to the disciples is a commission to us, too. We are to leave the safety and ease mountaintop, which in our case is the safety and ease of our pews on Sunday morning, and go out into the world to baptize and make disciples, not with force or fear, but with love and hospitality. In other words, to teach everything that Jesus taught – things like love and respect and justice and peace. And if we waver, if we have fears and doubts, which we will because we’re human just like the disciples were, remember that Jesus is right there with us. To the end of the ages, he said. And also remember, it’s God’s love that makes disciples. We are here just to carry the message.

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are eternally dancing in relationship with each other and with us all the time. Now it’s up to us to lovingly invite everyone we meet, “Do you wanna dance?”

Amen.