

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL
May 22, 2016 - Trinity Sunday

Sermon by Rev. Gloria Hopewell, D.Min.
Text: John 16: 12-15

Just a bit more than a week from now, on June 1, I will celebrate the twentieth anniversary of my graduation from seminary. At Chicago Theological Seminary in Hyde Park, the United Church of Christ seminary where I earned the Masters of Divinity degree, we were not required to take a national examination like the Episcopal Church's General Ordination Exams (GOE's). Or even comprehensive orals like the Presbyterians. Rather, we had to construct a theology. Construct a comprehensive thesis-length work that spelled out as clearly as we could, our beliefs, the foundations upon which we built our faith. We were expected to engage what we learned in our seminary classes and integrate this academic knowledge with our lived experience, drawing liberally on what we called "dialog partners" which might include tradition, scripture, theologians and others – writers, preachers, ordinary people of faith who had informed and impacted the formation of our faith. Whether we approached this task from a neo-orthodox or a liberal position, or from one of the theologies of liberation was less important than the completeness, coherence, and cohesiveness of the final product. It was not about regurgitating doctrinal principles or religious Truths or illustrating our vast knowledge of key theologians and biblical scholars. We were to articulate an understanding and ownership of a theological position that would sufficiently equip us for preaching, teaching, and pastoral ministry. Most of us, I expect, used some combination of classical theological categories or doctrines – God, Christ, Holy Spirit, church, creation, sin and evil, and so on. It might seem that after three years of seminary, field education, a stint at chaplaincy training, this would be a piece of cake! It was grueling.

Last week, when I was back in Chicago, I dug around in my archives, blew the dust bunnies off of the fruit of my labors and brought it back with me to Galena. Earlier this week, I read through it, actually looking for what I might have had to say about the Trinity.

To my surprise, the word "trinity" did not appear. I had a section on God and one on my Christology. There was one on the Holy Spirit, but it was very short – and weak. I recalled having had a struggle with it, not helped by the fact that my resources provided little assistance. Was this a reflection of my congregational and Puritan religious heritage that deals so much better with things of the mind and intellect?

I have discovered over these twenty years that I am not alone. In the lead up to Trinity Sunday – this one Sunday of the year that is not about the teachings of Jesus, not about the stories of Israel, not about the witness and growth of the first century church but a concept, a

doctrine, a mystery and ancient church tradition – my online colleagues, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Lutherans, are cracking jokes about getting the seminarian or associate to preach on this day. Or giving warnings about not slipping into one of the great heresies that naturally results from trying to explain it. Trying to explain the unexplainable with human language doesn't work that well.

Maybe we don't need the Holy Trinity any longer. We recall that this doctrine came to be as a defense against those who accused this new religion of worshipping more than one God. A way of figuring how God could be God, how God could be Jesus, how God could be the Holy Spirit and how Jesus and the Holy Spirit could be God without their being three separate beings. So many years later, we have received confusing, non-logical explanations, analogies that don't work, or puzzles like 3 in 1, 1 in 3, $1+1+1=1$. As we recite these words, "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" or "Creator, Redeemer, Giver of Life" in our creeds and blessings, sing them in our hymns, I wonder if we even give it much thought.

Logical thinking doesn't help when it comes to the glimpses of the Trinity in scripture either. In today's reading from John's gospel, part of Jesus' farewell to the disciples, he talks of going to the Father and sending the Spirit, the Advocate to them. Barbara Brown Taylor, priest, preacher, and professor of religion, comments on how all three seem to be operating independently:

Who are all these people? How can God the Father be his own son? And if Jesus is God, then whom is he talking to? And where does the Holy Spirit come in? Is that the spirit of God, the spirit of Jesus, or someone else altogether? If they are all one, then why do they come and go at different times, and how can one of them send another of them?

I find this to be true of our hymns on the trinity, too. Just look at them. They tend to have a separate verse for each of the three persons. Sometimes the fourth verse tries to tie it up, but not so well. Maybe we don't need the doctrine of the Trinity anymore.

And yet, and yet...our worship, our relationships with God are diminished when we do not strive to experience God's fullness. In some churches, for example, Jesus is rarely mentioned (at least not in prayers and hymns) – we may fear that doing so is too "evangelical." In others, the Holy Spirit is never invoked – that may be too "charismatic," too dangerous, uncontrollable. (This latter may have been the problem when I constructed my theology.) Or, we might have an imbalance: imaging God as wholly transcendent leading us to a God who is distant from us, uninvolved with the world, fearsome and judging. Or seeing God as wholly immanent – our friend who walks beside us, leading to a God domesticated and made in our own image.

The answer – rather, one answer, I think – is to approach the Trinity with the eyes of an artist, the ears of the poet, the soul of the mystic. For there is beauty in the mystery when we call upon our senses and our imaginations to tap into how we *experience* God rather than how we *explain* God.

To allow the Trinity to enliven and enrich our faith in this time and this place we need to look both forward and back. Forward to new images and language that speak to us today. Back to those 1st century Christians who had first hand experiences of God – who recalled encounters with a holy mystery that cried out for words to pass on to those who would come later. The holy mystery of the God of Israel, YHWH, who now met them in the person and ministry of Jesus and the resurrected Christ, and who they continued to experience through the power of the Holy Spirit in their midst. Before there were creeds and doctrines, stories and words of praise began to spontaneously arise that expressed three-fold symbols.

It was these three-fold symbols that the fourth century bishops tried to capture in the doctrines, though many would be found heretical: Tertullian's image of the Trinity as a plant where God the Father was the deep root, the Son a shoot that breaks forth into the world, and the Spirit is the flower or fruit that spreads beauty and fragrance. Or Augustine's image of fire, brightness, and warmth. Or water that can be liquid, solid ice, or vapor. All of these may help us but we need to remember that all are incomplete, and imprecise in describing the unity of the Trinity. There is always more.

For me, the most compelling came 400 years later from John of Damascus who described the inner life of God – a unity where the three persons “intermingle in a ceaseless flowing of love and shared life that opens out toward creation.” This is a relational image, one of community and equality, rather like a circle dance where the circle can be endlessly expanded to include all in the rhythm of love and life.

As we recite our creed together, as we sing and pray and bless, dwell a bit with the images. Use all of your senses, not just the rational mind. As we gather to share in the communion feast, let us encounter the mystery of our faith, the presence of God who is the source of our being; the God incarnate who shared our earthly life, teaching and healing, living and dying and overcoming death and God the Spirit who sustains and comforts us and prods us to live in justice, mercy, and peace. This feast is a sacred circle, a sacred dance, and there is a place in the circle for each and every one of us. In the name of the Living God, the Risen Christ, and the Life-Giving Spirit.

Amen.