

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Burt L. Burleson

“What to Do with the Trinity”

Isaiah 6: 1-8; John 3: 1-17; Romans 8: 12-17

June 11, 2006

About five months ago... we began a new church calendar year and started witnessing again and celebrating again, what God has done... God's activity.

So... there was an annunciation and a pregnancy.

And a birth and gifts from wise men.

There was a baptism...

A time of tempting...

Ministry, teachings and healings...

There was a turn towards Jerusalem...

A Palm Sunday...

A Holy Week... a death and resurrection.

And there were followers... seeing all of it.

And watching an ascension...

And being filled on Pentecost.

It's a story... we remember and gaze into and mark.

And then, there's Trinity Sunday... and it's a big day, but a day that really does not mark any event.

There's no happening... no defining scriptural moment or passage.

It's a day for a doctrine. A day when we say together as believers and with the Church, **“Here's what happened and here's what we think it means.”**

... Best we can say, anyway.

It took the church about... oh... 300 years to say it just the way we say it now. That's like saying in about 75 years we're going to have a definitive word about the U.S. Constitution.

Saying out loud what we meant by the Trinity... took a long time.

And involved lots and lots of study and conversation...

Prayer and worship and encounter...

Experience... remembrance...

Peter and the gang didn't wake up the day after Pentecost and say to one another, **“Yep... it's definitely one essence and yet three distinct, self-conscious persons... definitely a Triune God, we've been following.”**

No... there was a story and the story found expression in doctrines along the way.

And, it's not like the ideas were new, but in the 4th century, the statement in the worship guide came to be seen as the best way to put them all together. It didn't satisfy everyone... and it didn't get a unanimous vote... it's not perfect – only God is ... but here's what was put down on papyrus and parchment and what came to be called “The Nicene Creed.” Would you say it with me and with Christians all over the world?

We believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible:

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of His Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made;

Who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate;

He suffered and was buried, and on the third day He rose again according to the scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father;

And He shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead; Whose Kingdom shall have no end.

And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets.

And we believe in one catholic and apostolic church; we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins, and we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Did that clear it up for everyone? **“Begotten... not made... one substance with the Father...”** but yet flesh who walked among us? Everyone got that?

“The Giver of Life, who proceedeth from the Father... and the Son?” Does that pretty much clear it up for everyone? No more questions, right?

Three persons... One Substance, everyone got it?

If you think you get it... you haven't gotten it. Augustine said, **“If you can comprehend it, it's not God.”** If you can “get it”, it's not God... which for me, makes the Doctrine of the Trinity very good news.

It is incomprehensible because God is incomprehensible. So... the great confession on Trinity Sunday is not that we've nailed anything down but that we are standing before a great Mystery.

We believe in a God beyond us.

Beyond our concepts and ideas and words...

Beyond our ability...

Beyond, beyond.

And when we encounter this God... it evokes in us reverence. That was Isaiah's experience. It was just “awe.” **“Woe is me... I'm really small... I'm sinful.”** Holiness and real encounter with it... will have that effect.

As Jen Carron often says, **“Shut up!”** Yes... **“shut up!”** Before we spout or shout doctrines... before we offer an explanation... what we do is stand in awe.

That's really what happened in the early church and with the Early Church Fathers... They were worshippers first. They had encountered something and they fell down before it. They were drawn into a relationship with this great mystery.

They prayed...

They worshipped...

They revered... before they wrote... and as they wrote.

The disciples knelt before Jesus long before they wrote the gospels about Jesus. They found themselves worshipping first... not explaining.

They didn't “get it.” It was beyond them and it is beyond us... It is the Mystery of all mysteries.

Someone has said, it's like standing before a magnificent cliff... a edifice that is awesome and beautiful... one you'll never climb and you know you'll never climb it. You can touch it... admire it... be in awe of it... but never conquer it. (Leonardo Boff) So, **“shut up!”**

If you don't get it... then you're starting at the right place with the Trinity... humbled. ... But not necessarily, bewildered... not cut off from understanding. Mystery doesn't mean you can't understand, just not understand completely. There is a cliff right in front of you, after all. And even as this Trinitarian reality “evokes reverence”... it ought to also provoke your imagination and your thinking. (Boff, again... McGrath, Christian Spirituality, p 52) Like Nicodemus looking at night ... Go searching. **“It can't just be – well, I believe it... I say the creed, and it's a mystery and all,”** but it makes no difference.

Something has been revealed. And really... that's what our Faith is about. We have seen a great light. There is something we have to say and want to tell about who God is.

Christianity is a message about what has been revealed.

“Who is God?”

“What is God like?”

“What does God want?”

And even as we affirm what others might say... **“God is beautiful... God is Holy... God is Good... God is compassionate... God is one...”**

We have come to say, **“God is a Trinity.”** This is the nature of God... what God is. We believe this is the God made known to us, through the story of scripture and in the life of Jesus and in the Church. **Father, Son, and Spirit.**

And we look at it and say, **“Wow.”** But if we’re alive at all, we also say, **“How?”** How can we say there’s one God and yet worship Jesus? It is very confusing, and confusing to all of us... this belief.

And there were a gillion analogies offered trying to help us... just handles, really... ways of talking about it.

Three torches... one flame.

Son and Spirit were the two hands of God.

Or they were heart and blood.

Or this was a family... or a dance... metaphors of all kinds.

A river! God is the Source; the Son, the riverbed; the Spirit, the water.

One chord... three notes.

That sort of thing... not unhelpful, but still just a way to talk about it. At the end of the day... it’s confusing... difficult.

But... as I read this week, as difficult as it may be, The Trinity is not a wall, it’s a doorway. (Boff) And we step through it as others have and we step into a radical reconsideration of God’s nature. A big shift...

God is one and God is three, coequal and eternal in relationship to one another. Within God’s very being, the nature of it, is relationship and sharing and mutuality. God is love and love by definition is out going... it’s ecstatic. It gives of self. Ultimate reality is not isolated and alone, ultimate reality is a great giving. And so is God. God is not some static, monolithic old man... God is love... and love is dynamic, ever-changing, responding, and giving.

It isn’t contained within itself. The Greek philosophers prior to Christ had thought this way... **“Whatever the ultimate good is... it must be self-sharing in order for it to be ultimate.”**

And so, God is this movement of love... Completely self-giving, always self-emptying, but never self-annihilating. Love doesn’t do that. There’s still threeness. As G. K. Chesterton said, **“When the lion and lamb lay down together, the lion is still a lion.”** Love loves the other, it doesn’t absorb it.

Within Being therefore, while there is oneness, there is difference... uniqueness... even though there is no separation. There is diversity and a diversity revealed in the world and in the history of God’s action. The universe reveals this pattern of sameness and difference, even as the biblical story has. Father, Son, and Spirit: with unique roles, but always working together, through and with one another. No one’s doing their own thing.

Listen to the poetic praise of the Early Church Fathers...

**Hail, Father, source of the Son,
Son, the Father’s image;
Father, the ground where the Son stands,
Son, The Father’s seal;
Father, the power of the Son;
Son, the Father’s beauty;
All-pure Spirit; bond between the Father and the Son.**
(Synesius of Cyrene)

See... it’s not a wall, The Trinity, it’s an opening... a window into the nature of reality. If God is this way, then creation, which flows from God, is this way. It’s all one... and yet within creation there is dazzling diversity. And we... we are one body and yet different. Human nature mirrors Divine nature.

This is the way life is and the way we are because this is the way God is. God's being is the DNA of the universe... this is the way it is and the way it works. There is a family resemblance between everything and God. (R. Rohr) Everything, and science knows this now, is in relationship. The real energy of everything is what is in between... from the smallest cell to galaxies. As incomprehensible as it is, this is the mystery we see.

... And live. And that's the most important thing. It really can't just be a neat idea in a creed. In fact, when that's the case, it can be dangerous to the world. Folks who get convicted of the ideas in their minds... without learning to live out those ideas, have caused plenty of pain in the world.

God didn't primarily invite us to a doctrine, a way of believing, but to a way of being. Or, better said, to return to a way of being. What is revealed is something we're invited into... to live.

This doctrine should make a difference everyday.

For instance, you cannot worship and adore, know and follow the Triune God and justify greed. Because within God's being there is mutuality... sharing... emptying. And if this kind of God is moving through you... you won't live that way.

You can't look at yourself and say, "I don't need other people..." or "I'm an individual." No, you're not... not without me. There is no self that is not in relationship. Not God, not you. You only exist in relationship. There is no isolated being. A Trinitarian life is always self-transcendent... taking you beyond you.

Do you see how a living Trinitarian faith changes you?

How could I, why would I envy you, if we are one?

And why also should I, if I'm uniquely made?

I cannot look down on you, if we are not separate. I can't hate you. Trinitarian faith not only calls me to love neighbor and enemy but to see that I am my enemy and neighbor. The Trinity is a neighborhood.

And I can't ignore you or anyone and be in relationship to the Triune God. Kallistos Ware says, "**Our faith in the Trinity puts us under an obligation to struggle at every level, from the strictly personal to the highly organized, against all forms of oppression, injustice, and exploitation.**" (The Orthodox Way) Mutuality in God calls us to mutuality at every level. Love is always a receiving and a giving, according to what we believe. Father to Son, Son to Spirit, Spirit to you, you to me, all of us to the world.

See... it's a doctrine we can live... must live. We are created in the image of God... this Trinitarian mark is upon us... we remember it in some deep place. And our lives only work and the world only works when we live out this truth. Or maybe better said, "**when we let itself live itself in us and through us.**" And to block it is the reality of sin.

But it is sort of chicken and egg... because as we live it out, we come to really know it. Our Orthodox brothers and sisters... before they say the creed, say, "**Let us love one another so that we may with one mind confess Father, Son, and Holy Spirit... the Trinity, one essence, undivided.**"

Which takes us full circle. How do we get this? We don't, really... it gets us. As we love God and love one another, the grace of God works within us in such a way that we begin to see things... ultimate things.

Like Isaiah, we get purified... and with Paul we understand that along the way, the Spirit is enabling us to intimately say to God, "**Abba... my father.**" We are returned to an essential intimacy with God and therefore with all things. "**All things are mine since I am His.**" This is the knowing we're called to.

Remember the little saying Evagrius taught his disciples? "**Faith, the beginning of love. The end of love knowledge of God.**" This is something that we can only know from the inside... inside God, where we know "**his glory,**" Paul says, and "**his suffering**"... his compassion... and self-emptying eternal love. And all of that begins in faith... simple trust and confession.

We confess a great thing...

And so we live a wonderful way...

So that in time... we'll know all that matters.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit... one God, forevermore. Amen.