

Trinity Sunday (Year C)

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Preached at Belleville Congregational Church, Newburyport, MA

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Winston Churchill once described the nation then known as the Soviet Union as “a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.” This was his way of saying that it was almost impossible to understand what that nation was all about. (Based on what we’re seeing in Ukraine today, he still very much seems right.)

Today, Trinity Sunday, we are faced with a “riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma” – who, or what, is the Holy Trinity? How do we go about describing what Martin Luther once called, “the mathematics of the Godhead”? *Is* there a “correct” way to describe the One whom we can scarcely understand? The question really is, “*Who is God?*” And that’s a question that seems so impossible we tremble at the thought of trying to answer it. Are we not on shaky ground to even *attempt* an answer? Would we not be better off to let things lie and not rush in where angels fear to tread? Such, I believe, is not an option for us.

Indeed, Scripture tells us our duty is to love God with all our *minds* as well as all our hearts. And part of applying the mind to this task is doing whatever we can to try and understand just who this God is that we are called to love with soul and strength as well as heart and mind.

Nevertheless, in doing so, we must be cautious. God is *not* a “problem to be solved.” Our human tendency, particularly in this age where language is evolving so rapidly, is to think that *everything* begs a solution – we *have* to figure out a better way to express what we mean by the traditional language, “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

To be honest, we have done a poor job trying. In some of our musings, we have reduced God to “functions”: creator, redeemer, sustainer, etc. Perhaps today’s first reading, speaking as it does of Wisdom, and speaking of Wisdom in feminine language, adds another layer of intrigue.

How does one describe the Holy? How does one reduce to human language the One who “sits upon the throne” as Isaiah puts it – or is revealed throughout the Hebrew Scriptures as “beyond our human knowing”?

The other day I happened upon a Jewish biblical scholar appearing on television who described how difficult it is for Jews to speak of God in the kind of personal, relational terms Christians do. He could not even fathom a God one could describe as being in a “personal relationship” with us. Yet his own scriptures, again Isaiah to name but one example, describe God exactly that way.

What both Testaments reveal is a God who can indeed be known – but not as an “intimate buddy” or, despite the old hymn’s lyrics, a “friend,” as in “what a friend we have in Jesus.” No, God is revealed ultimately in *worship*. Whether that worship is the Temple worship of the ancient Jerusalem, or the heavenly worship described in John’s Revelation, ultimately it is only in *worship* that we can *know* the wholeness and the holiness of God, the mystery of the Trinity, the God whose very Being *is* relationship: God who is Father, God who is Son, God who is Holy Spirit – and, by the way, I’ve evolved to the point that I no longer use those terms apologetically. Some concepts, some understandings, are just simply beyond our ability to make “politically correct.”

If attempting to “describe” the Holy is our first challenge, the second is trying to journey toward a deeper understanding of God’s unity, which is every bit as important to our understanding of Trinity as our understanding of God as *three* in one. The ancient “*Shema*,” the consummate statement of faith in the Torah, says it well. “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is *one*.” Our faith is rooted and grounded in our belief that God is one – monotheism – one God.

When we begin to explore the New Testament, we need to keep in mind that those who followed Jesus knew this one God, and it was *this* God – this *one* God – whom they worshiped. Captured as they were by this incredible Word-made-flesh, Jesus of Nazareth, they never lost sight of this. Even as they saw in him the fullness and the authority of God – an authority that was made even clearer by his having been raised from death – never did they seek to make of him a “second god” – or of the Spirit he sent, a “third.”

Which brings us to our Gospel reading for today. We are hearing yet again this week from Jesus’ farewell discourse, his last words to his disciples before being led to the Cross. Jesus knew that he was about to leave them without his physical presence to guide them. He needed a way of comforting them, of helping them know that what he had brought them would not end just because he was risen and ascended. He describes the One he would send as “the Spirit of Truth” – as the one who “will guide [them] into all

the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but ... declare to [them] the things that are to come." He will, Jesus goes on, "take what is mine and declare it to you." He then brings the Father into this discourse so that, if you extrapolate a bit, all Three of the Persons of God are present practically within a sentence.

Today, we, too, experience the wholeness and the holiness of God in ways that suggest a Trinity. First, we experience God as a **Power above us**, greater than us, beyond our human realm. This is God the Father, God the creator of heaven and earth, God who, to quote one of our Eucharistic Prayers in the Episcopal tradition, is "from before time and forever." This is the One who stands behind all that is and all that is to be. Such is the God understood by God's first creation, Wisdom, the God who calls us into pilgrimage, the God who calls us beyond the obvious to imagine the unimaginable and grasp realities that are ungraspable.

Second, we experience God as the **Power beside us**, specifically the power we can see in human form in the person and message of Jesus. God the Son, God the Redeemer, God who offered God's Self in love on the Cross for the sake of the whole world. This is the God Isaiah was pointing to six hundred years before he actually appeared among us – the "suffering servant" God who would die to save his people.

Finally, we experience God as the **Power within us**. God the Holy Spirit, the One who see us through when life is rough, who sustains us, comforts us, nurtures us, guides us, sometimes *confronts* us, the Counselor, the Advocate, the Spirit of Truth.

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Trinity. We may never "figure out" God – and, I believe, ultimately, we are not called to. Rather, we are called to be a lifted, truth-searching, open-minded, open-hearted people who are willing to see God in places others aren't even looking – and where, perhaps, we ourselves sometimes aren't looking. Lifted, day by day, by this mysterious Presence, this "riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma," we join with the literally millions down through the centuries, who have sought to more deeply experience the wholeness and the holiness of God. As one of the prayers we share in common, the Doxology, states:

Praise God from whom ALL blessings flow.

Praise God ALL creatures here below.

Praise God above ALL heavenly hosts.

Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen!