

Trinity Sunday

June 11, 2017

Rev. Ken Wratten at St. Luke's

Genesis 1:1 – 2:4a      Creation

2 Corinthians 13:11-13      Grace of Jesus, love of God, communion of the Holy Spirit

Matthew 28:16-20      Great Commission

This is a very different kind of Sunday in the church year. Every other Feast Day of the year is about an event (like Easter or Christmas or Epiphany or Pentecost). But today we celebrate a doctrine. Brilliant minds over the last 2000 years have worked to clearly define the Trinity. Listen to some of the attempts:

From Tertullian (Carthage, Africa d 225), the divine Word (Son) existed originally within the Father's mind, and first became a distinct Person when the world was created; the Spirit's personality was subsequent to that of the Word; they were therefore not strictly co-eternal with the Father. No. Heresy.

From Origen (Alexandria, Egypt d 254), the Word (Son) is the offspring of the Father, and the Spirit came into being through the Word; their respective roles being to control the universe and inspire the saints. No. Heresy.

From the Modalists, the one divine Person has acted successively as creator, redeemer, and sanctifier. No. Heresy

We get the correct answer from *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*: The One God exists in Three Persons (F, S, HS) and one substance. The Persons differ only in origin, in that the Father is ungenerated, the Son is generated by the Father, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son.

That language began with the Council of Nicea in 325 which settled that the Father and Son are 'of the same essence'. Then the Council of Constantinople in 381 established the divinity and co-eternality of the HS. (Niceo-Constantopolitan Creed). This creed was written to fight heresy, not to educate on the Trinity.

St Patrick (late 400s) figured that was a bit unclear to preach on, so he used a shamrock to teach the Trinity: three-in-one leaves symbolize F, S, HS in one Supreme being.

Our experiences of God pre-date all of this theo-speak.

When I was a boy I remember learning about God making it rain for 40 days and 40 nights, and guiding Noah to build an ark. I remember the story of God being present in the burning bush that drew Moses' attention; and later God giving Moses the Ten Commandments on stone tablets. I remember the stories of God that made me think of a deep rumbling voice, and shaking ground, and Moses' hair turned white just from being in God's presence, and people dying if they caught a glimpse of God. That is the God of unlimited power, who drives reverent fear into anybody who dares to come near.

In Sunday School I learned that I was supposed to obey and love God. Well, I would obviously try to OBEY God – I sure didn't want to make Him mad! But how could I feel love for a Spirit I couldn't see, and one who seemed to get really angry sometimes.

I remember struggling a lot as a teenager with the idea that Jesus was God too. Wait a minute. How can Jesus be God? God is the drown-the-world God; stone tablets God; sending serpents upon the complaining, grumbling Israelites God. If that is God, how can Jesus, the man who taught about loving your enemy, be God?

The Creeds didn't help me figure it out. "We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, of one being with the Father." No, that didn't really help me to understand. But they weren't written to. They weren't a teaching tool; they were written to combat heresies in the early church.

What helped me figure it out was to finally talk with people of deep faith who showed me that this faith is not only an intellectual pursuit, but it happens by experiencing a relationship with Jesus. So I opened myself up to giving it a try. And I sensed inside me that Jesus wasn't only a real person back in the first century who taught how much God loves us, but he IS a part of that same God, and wants a personal friendship with me. And when I gave myself permission to try out that personal friendship with this brother-God, I felt myself changed. I cared more about other people than I ever had before. And I cared about what God thought about me. I cared about not using swear words anymore (well, mostly), and stopping some old ways that started to make me feel guilty (like pulling practical jokes), and there were books I couldn't read anymore, and movies I wouldn't watch anymore, and I began to choose the kind of people I would let influence me. I was changed from the inside out.

And then I found out that the Holy Spirit isn't really a bird. The Holy Spirit is the presence of God inside me, and who places the belief in me that God loves me, and helps me believe that I can love God back. The Holy Spirit is the presence of the God who comforts me when I'm up against huge challenges, and She helps me get through them. And the Holy Spirit is the presence of God convicting me with a feeling of guilt when I say hurtful things to people because I'm tired, or because I think I'm right and want them to know they're wrong, or because they hurt me first and I want to hurt them back. And the Holy Spirit is the one who pushes me into making a phone call to apologize for my having done something stupid, asking somebody to accept my apology.

In the story of Creation, God decided to create. It was God's Word that caused each step to be accomplished. In John's Gospel, we learn that Jesus is that Word made flesh, who was with the Father from the beginning. The 'wind of God' swept over the unformed creation. That wind, *ruach*, breath of God, is understood by

Christians to be God's Spirit. This passage reflects the presence of the three persons of God at the Creation.

We celebrate the Trinity of God because we see God as transcendent father-God, above us and all powerful. We experience God as loving brother-God, who lived and died for us to demonstrate in acts of gentleness and humility and suffering how very much our God loves us. We experience God as Spirit-God, dwelling in every believer at the same time, and giving comfort and counsel, and booster shots of faith when we need it the most. However the theologians word it, we know how it feels to experience God. God isn't worried in the least about us trying to figure Him out. But God longs for us to experience a full relationship with Him. The persons of the Trinity widen and broaden our awareness of how full that relationship can be. In seminary I learned about the teaching of the Cappadocian Fathers – and learned I am right! ☺

And so, when you pray to God, who do you pray to? Consider this...

Father God – master of creation; the reason I exist;

Brother God – my advocate, who has felt what I feel – joy, fear, pain, grieving

Spirit God – Helping me 'feel' God near me and in me.

Today, Trinity Sunday, is the perfect day to commit yourself, or to re-commit yourself, to this personal relationship with our triune God; who is our creator father-God; our loving brother-God; and our indwelling spirit-God. Anselm of Canterbury coined the phrase defining our work as Christians; "faith seeking understanding". As we pray for the faith to accept a less than complete understanding of Trinitarian doctrine, may we keep ourselves open to deepening our experience of relationship with our Lord and our God. Amen