

Sermon Trinity Sunday Year A 2011

Genesis 1:1-2:4a

Psalm 8 or Canticle 2

2 Corinthians 13:11-13

Matthew 28:16-20

Bill Watson

My son sent me a funny Father's Day Card. On the cover it asks, "Know why Father's Day is in June?" Open the card and it says, "Because about a month after Mother's Day, somebody went, 'Hey! Wait a minute...'" There may be a little truth in that card. Father's Day is about relationship and this Sunday is a special day in terms of relationship, especially when we consider our divine parents.

Today is Trinity Sunday. So today we try to make sense of something that the church calls the Doctrine of the Trinity.

One way of understanding Christianity is as an off-shoot of Judaism. The earliest converts to Jesus were called followers of "the Way." Many were faithful Jews who had been attracted to the discipleship of Jesus.

The Jewish faith is a monotheistic faith that worships the one God of Israel. So awesome was their God that they did not speak the divine name. Our lessons began with the primary lesson that begins the Hebrew Scriptures. The story of creation describes God breathing order out of chaos. God speaks creation. Later in scripture, God spoke to Moses from the burning bush and spoke later in the radiant clouds on the holy mountain. God spoke to Samuel as he slept in the Temple. God spoke as well through the prophets. But then the story changed.

As history unfolded this one God of Israel changed religious understanding and history. Something entirely new unfolded when God moved away from the longstanding prophetic tradition. No longer would God speak to his beloved people of Israel through the prophets, such as Moses, Elijah, Amos, and others. God, as the prophet Isaiah expressed it, was "doing a new thing." This new thing was sending his Son, the preexisting Word of God, now made flesh in human form in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Now, humanity would encounter the very nature of divine life in Jesus. Jesus' life and ministry attracted the first disciples and followers and they in turn followed Jesus' command that we heard in the gospel lesson. "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."

The disciples did just that empowered by the presence and action of the promised Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is part of what Jesus meant when he said, "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." After Jesus' ascension to the Father, the promised gift of the Holy Spirit came in the event that we celebrated last Sunday, the Feast of Pentecost.

Understanding just how the one God of Israel could be present in three distinct forms was not intuitively obvious. The early church struggled to comprehend and make sense of the nature of divine life as that divine nature had come to be revealed to them.

For the first five centuries of the church's life the understanding of the nature of God evolved through scholastic encounter with scripture. We have heard from John's gospel over the past several weeks, examples of the relational nature of God. Jesus said, "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us." (John 17:21) And later, "I in them, and you in me, that they may become completely one." Reflection on scripture led to the understanding of this interwoven life of God.

We sang of this doctrine in our opening hymn in words attributed to St. Patrick, "I bind unto myself today, the strong name of the Trinity, the three in one and one in three." We spoke of this Trinity in our opening collect. "And bring us at last to see you in your one and eternal glory, O Father; who with the Son and the Holy Spirit live and reign, one God." This doctrine is also expressed each Sunday in the words of the Nicene Creed.

The Trinity directs us towards God, the one God who exists as three distinct yet completely interrelated and perfectly connected "persons". The very life of God is an interwoven pattern of relationship between three distinct "persons" as we call them. The observant among you have seen the beautiful Celtic cross on our bulletin this morning. The cross was chosen because of its interwoven quality. Over the coming weeks we will use images of crosses that share this Trinitarian theme. But this interwoven theme is not easy to comprehend.

Clergy have struggled just as the early church struggled to explain the Trinity. One way to explain difficult subjects is by using an analogy. And over the years, many analogies have been used to try to explain the Trinity. As an example, consider water. Water, H₂O, exists in three states or forms depending upon its temperature. Under freezing conditions it is a solid in the form of ice. At room temperature it is a liquid which we designate as water. And at very high temperatures water boils and turns into steam. The same molecular structure, H₂O, yet it assumes three different forms depending upon the temperature.

I was visiting folks at W-C last week and when I do I try to drop in and visit with a beloved retired priest, Louis Fischer. Louis asked how I was doing and I told him that I was working on my sermon for Trinity Sunday, the toughest church doctrine to explain. I asked Louis for his favorite Trinity analogy. Without batting an eye, he broke into a broad smile and said 3-in-One oil. I laughed, 3-in-one oil, indeed. Long before the host of modern lubricants such as WD-40, STP, Fluid Film, or Silicone sprays, there was 3-IN-ONE Oil, which goes all the way back to 1894. 3-in-One is an all purpose drip oil. It comes in the familiar red and white can. Its name derives from its three uses, all from the same product at the same

time. The oil lubricates moving parts, prevents rust, and cleans and protects tools. 3-IN-ONE. A great example from a very knowledgeable priest of the church.

The doctrine of the Trinity at its heart is a statement about relationship. Relationship is a defining quality of the divine life. And that relational quality continues in the Christian faith and life. Jesus has promised to be with us always. From at least our baptism, the Holy Spirit is with us as well. God's very life is interwoven with our lives. We not only bear the image of God as we heard in the lesson from Genesis, but we actually contain and carry with us part of that divine life. Each of us is a God bearer.

As such the nature of the Christian life is relational. God is constantly calling us into relationship with one another. A principle vehicle of encounter is here in the church, this sacred space where we gather each week. This is the place of encounter with God and with one another. This gathering connects us with the divine life and invites us into that life. The connection is love. Love of God and our love for one another.

As Christians, we live our lives in the community of the church. These neighbors next to us are the people that God has brought into our lives. Not casually or coincidentally, but deliberately. Each person is here in response to the call of God. As such, each person here is a gift. The Christian faith is one that understands that in welcoming each person that comes here, we are also welcoming the divine. In doing so, we become the community that God is creating, but only inasmuch as we recognize each person here as a gift and treat each other with love.

I have seen that loving connection lived out in some dramatic ways here at St. John's. While I am tempted to share them, it is hard to share stories from our common life together. For preachers, it is usually better to share stories from elsewhere.

Recently, I was on retreat at the Diocese of East Carolina's Trinity Conference Center. This was the site of last week's Junior Youth Mission Trip. While I was there a month ago I witnessed an amazing encounter. As my group and I sat on the beach, I watched an environmental educator working with a class of middle school students. After the group instruction, the students moved out to explore the sand and shore looking for examples that the educator had described. And then I saw her. As the group dispersed I could see clearly the high-backed wheelchair. In it was a quadriplegic young girl accompanied by two teenage camp counselors in their blue Camp Trinity T-shirts. This student had no control of her arms or legs. And yet that did not mean that a trip to the beach couldn't be worked out.

A counselor pushed the wheelchair awkwardly through the sand while the other counselor picked up pieces of shells, crabs, driftwood, and other shore elements and placed them in the girl's hands. It was a moving sight. When Christ calls us into relationship that means that we are all to be included. What that looks like in practice is amazing. These counselors showed me the hands of Christ as they tenderly lifted beach artifacts and placed them in the girl's hands. Their commitment allowed her to participate in

the environmental activity with the rest of her class. The divinity in her encountering the divinity in those who worked with her. That is how life is some days; we are just going along when we look up and see Christ in our midst, just as Christ has promised to be.

On this Trinity Sunday, which this year falls on Father's Day, we reflect upon the relationship that exists within God which we express as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That divine relationship though at its best can be seen in our gatherings as well, right here with us. God has been hard at work, doing "more than we can ask or imagine." Drawing you and me together here at this time and in this place, to reveal something of the divine life to us. You see, it is in greeting and relating to one another that we come to see the face of God in our midst.