

John 16:12-15 (NRSV)

"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Trinity Sunday is known for many things. It is known to be the Sunday after Pentecost and around here, Pentecost is a big deal. It is also, informally, considered the cusp of summer – in some churches it is the last week of choir and of Sunday School, though both of ours continue for another week. It is the last “white” Sunday in what will become an endless sea of “green” Sundays. It is known for a bunch of things, but not usually for the Trinity.

Partly this is because preachers seldom preach on the Trinity. The Trinity is an unpopular topic among preachers, ironically for three reasons. First, it is a subject that is very difficult to understand, one of the church’s first great really obscure doctrines. Second, it is a doctrine that is dangerous to misunderstand because it has been very productive of heretical error, and unpleasant things like burning at the stake used to happen to heretics before heresy became so common. Third, it is a doctrine that most preachers will tell you is not very rewarding to understand correctly, apart from avoiding heresy and subsequent unpleasantness. So the Trinity is a thing that is easy and dangerous to get wrong and hard and unrewarding to get right,

very much like cliffdiving, dating a porcupine or speaking in Hungarian.

I've only recently become convinced by a recent excellent book by William Placher¹ that it can be rewarding to have a better understanding of the Holy Trinity and, as a part of my continuing effort to make you all cutting-edge lay theologians, today, I'm going to try to convince you why.

Let me start with less satisfactory ways to understand the Holy Trinity. OK, there are Father, Son and Holy Spirit. All three are understood to be God, but, nonetheless, there is only one God. That's the nub of it, right there – if there is one God, how can there be three other somethings and if there are three other somethings, what are they? From here we go into some very obscure ideas that made much more sense to ancient Greeks than they do to us, ideas having to do with one substance but three persons and so on. Most of these ideas are more confusing than they are helpful, so if you haven't heard of them, don't worry – that's just less you'll need to forget.

Now, the good ways and good reasons to understand the Holy Trinity. To begin with, we need to understand the Trinity to understand the Bible. This is true even though the word, "Trinity" doesn't appear in the Bible. Not anywhere. Because there are lots of passages that talk about God, about Jesus and about the Holy Spirit, some of them at the same time.

For example, at the end of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says, "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." Paul, at the end of 2 Corinthians offers the benediction, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the

¹ I am indebted to William Placher for his excellent discussion of the Trinity in *The Triune God* (2007). Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.

communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all,” and we use that end to 2 Corinthians as the greeting in our worship service nearly every Sunday. And there is Paul in 1 Corinthians talking about a variety of gifts but the same Spirit, varieties of services but the same Lord, varieties of activities but the same God who activates them all in everyone. So, at several crucial points, the New Testament uses Trinitarian language.

I don't think that the purpose of Trinitarian language is to *explain* the relationships between Father, Son and Holy Spirit as much as it is to *preserve the mystery* of them. The purpose of Trinitarian language in the Bible and in the faith is to describe the mysterious, paradoxical and continuing presence of God in our lives in all sorts of ways.

The problem with less satisfactory ways of talking about the Trinity is that they begin with the One God and try to describe how that God has three aspects or persons or whatever. It seems to me that the better way is to begin with the Three as they appear in scripture, history and our lives together and show how they are all the same God.

In the Bible and in faith, we understand God to be the Father, everpresent and eternal, who formed all that exists. But we also see God in Jesus, a man who lived at a particular time and place and yet who now reigns with the Father, everpresent and eternal, and who will return to judge the living and the dead. And finally, we understand God as the Holy Spirit that dwells among us to form and encourage and inspire. Trinitarian language allows us to express these three different but equally important ways God is present in scripture and history and in life.

So, for example, we see the Father God in the creation of the world and in the shaping of God's people, the sons and daughters of Abraham. This Father God formed the universe and the earth

and gave order to chaos. This Father God made covenants with Noah and with Abraham and with Moses. This Father God we understand as the source of all that is.

We see God in the person of Jesus who was and is God's decisive self-revelation in history. When Phillip asks Jesus to show us the Father, Jesus replies, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." Who has seen Jesus has seen the Father – the Father cannot be seen except in the Son. One reason that Trinitarian language is so important is to show that there is no hidden God behind, or apart from Jesus. No God less merciful or loving than the God we meet in Jesus.

As I walked with the idea of the Trinity for the past couple of weeks, I began to see how often the Holy Spirit appears in the Bible. We think of the Spirit most frequently as the Advocate that Pastor Wendy spoke of last week on Pentecost. The Spirit that came to the assembled believers in the upper room or in Jerusalem at the feast of the Pentecost. The Spirit of the Church. But the Spirit is also active in the birth and the Baptism of Jesus, and in driving Jesus into the Wilderness after the Baptism.

In the Older Testament, the Hebrew word for the Spirit is "Ruach" and that also translates as wind or breath. We find the word, famously, in Genesis, chapter 1, verse 2 where the Spirit of God or the wind or breath of God "moved over the waters" of the yet unformed universe. It is also a wind from God, or the Spirit of God that sweeps in from the east to drive back the sea so that the Israelites can escape the Egyptians.

The Spirit of God in the Older Testament sometimes gives the sense of uncontrollable power. When the spirit of God comes on Samson, he tears a lion apart, kills three men and slays a thousand Philistines with the jawbone of an ass. But the Spirit was

also said to have rested on some of the other judges of Israel, on Othniel and Gideon and Jephthah as well as Samson, and here the Spirit seems to give wisdom and discernment rather than strength and frenzy. The Spirit is said to descend on Saul and David, on the Kings of Israel as well, sometimes as an uncontrollable power, and sometimes as wisdom and discernment.

In the Newer Testament, Paul regularly talks about the gifts of the Spirit of wisdom or knowledge or healing, miracles or prophecy. Perhaps most important is Paul's idea in first Corinthians, Chapter 12 – “No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit.” The Spirit *inspires* – what does inspire mean except to take in the Spirit?

The Spirit seems to have to do with community, the capacity to unify, lead and judge the people in the Older Testament, and the task of forming and gifting and inspiring the people in the Newer Testament. In both testaments, the Bible speaks of the Spirit at the moments when the church as the people of God is assembled, endowed, commissioned and inspired.

So, you see, the Blessed Trinity is not an explanation of how One God becomes Three, but rather a confession that Three – the Father in history, the Son in revelation and the Spirit in community – are One, all these are the single, one God whom we worship. All three are with us and for us, all necessary, all vital.

Have you noticed that congregations can become centered on one or another way of describing God? There are Father creator churches – often these are mainline churches with a strong sense of history. There are Jesus churches, churches that focus on the personal presence and love of God among us in Jesus. And there are Spirit churches, churches that are on fire with the wild, uncontrollable presence of God. What Trinitarian language tells us is that all of these are legitimate expressions but none are

complete, because none can capture the fullness of God in our lives.

When a child asks you what God is like, you don't have only one thing to say. You have many things you can say, many things, or at least three, that you *should* say. As we read our Bible, as we view our world, as we live in community, we are aware of the presence of God. God as eternal and God as here in the moment; God in our personal, comforting relationship with Christ and God in the wild, uncontrollable power of the Spirit; God as the all-powerful Father on the mountaintop and God as the vulnerable Jesus on the Cross. All of these are God, the Three-in-One. All are the same God we worship and praise, today and every day.

Amen.