

**Trinity Sunday June 11, 2017**

**Like a Good Story**

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There can be something delightfully mysterious that happens whenever a person finds themselves in a good story. Perhaps you have been fortunate enough to have had such an experience yourself. This mysterious occurrence requires several components: a story, a story teller, whether that is a writer, bard, poet, director, and the means of conveying the story, be it a book, a movie, a TV show, actors on a stage, etc. When these three components all come together, when they all work together to share the story, to make it accessible and real to the world, some of us who are in the world can get caught up in the whole thing, and by some delightful mystery find ourselves so engaged in the story that we lose all track of time and place and it can feel like we aren't sitting in a theater, or in our favorite chair at home, or in a grand library, but are somehow transported into the story itself.

The reason for this isn't just the story, or the storyteller, or the means of making the story real; no one actor or the type of paper a book is printed on can make that happen by itself. It is the way all those elements come together that creates the magic that sweeps the human imagination into a new place and time. It is the way those components interact with each other that gives life to the endeavor and at the same time invites someone outside the story to enter into it.

This delightful mystery can happen with music too, when a song or an opera or certain composition captivates a listener and they find themselves transported by notes, musicians or singers and directors working together to bring a composition to life.

Such a delightful mystery can be experienced, but not so easily explained. Some of us might try, we might talk about a movie we saw, or a concert we attended, or a recording we heard, and talk about how meaningful it was for us, but rarely do we attempt to break down each part of our experience, categorize it, explain it, define it, and lock it away. It is something too elusive for that, something we can't quite pin down.

It would be like trying to see a dance routine by looking only at one photograph of one step. Or one chapter of a story. Or one scene of a movie. Or one note in a concerto. It is the movements, the way the parts come together, relate to each other, that allows us to come into the event.

Such a delightful mystery can also be a way to approach the mysterious doctrine of the church called the Trinity. Today is a day the Church sets aside just for that purpose, to explore and contemplate Trinity, something that the church itself has struggled with for thousands of years and continues to struggle with to this day. It is said to be one of the least favorite days for preachers; there is an ongoing clergy joke that says rectors often assign their deacons, assistants, or seminarians to preach on Trinity Sunday.

As a matter of fact, the very first time I preached a sermon, it was on Trinity Sunday the summer before I started seminary. It was part of the preparation my rector at the time wanted for me, and he generously shared all his source materials with me to help me write a sermon for the day. However, I did not find the material he gave me comforting or helpful, as the first words I read informed me that it is impossible to preach on Trinity without preaching heresy. This distressed me, so I called my priest, who is now my good friend and mentor, and he laughed at my concern of unintentionally leading a parish astray, or giving them a false or fake gospel, by telling me I didn't know enough to know if I was preaching heresy or not as he didn't, and neither would the parish. That was his way of saying it is a mystery that not even the Church Fathers could ever sort out. So, I just had to go ahead and do the prayerful best I could.

In seminary, I learned that the doctrine of the Trinity was one of the causes of fights in the church, fights that often turned violent. It is also the cause for some of the divisions of the church. It seems Trinity can be a volatile mystery, which might make us wonder why the church has decided to hold onto it. I guess all we can do is keep going the prayerful best we can.

As I continue to grow and learn and preach and pray and reflect and read I wonder if part of the problem with the Church's doctrine of the Trinity is that too often we attempt to see the whole dance by trying to nail down one step, or appreciate a whole story by only examining one chapter, or listen to a magnificent composition by only studying one bar. Perhaps Trinity, a way to describe, or as Jesus seemed to say in today's Gospel, name God, as Father and Son and Holy Spirit, three persons in One God, isn't about nailing down or capturing something static. Instead, perhaps a way to consider Trinity is as a way to invite us all into the delightful mysterious interaction or relationship of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

In his book about Trinity called *The Divine Dance*, Franciscan priest, founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation, and Academic Dean of the Living School for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Richard Rohr writes about how instead of trying to make the idea of Trinity fit with the Western ways of thinking

that are rather two sided: good or bad, liberal or conservative, rich or poor, republican or democrat, that set up a dichotomy he believes is to blame for the painful divisions in our country, we need to let go of there being only two sides and understand God is not divided, God is whole, and for God wholeness is Trinity, which is an on-going relationship. Richard Rohr's way of looking at the Trinity is not new, its actually very old, and echoes the writings of early several Church Doctors, mystics and contemplatives.

He explains in his book that when you can let go of needing only two sides, and see wholeness in three, then you can begin to see God in everything in the universe. One example he gave was in the atom, one of the smallest components of all mater, and an atom is made up of three parts: neutron, proton, and electron. Three parts so tiny we can't see them with our naked eyes, and seemingly harmless. Yet the scientific discoveries of the 20<sup>th</sup> century learned how to harness the incredible power of the on-going interaction of those three components when they made the atom bomb. Atomic energy isn't from the neutron, or the proton, nor the electron alone, but in the interaction of the three that make them one, or what makes them whole.

Fr. Rohr's book can be a helpful way to think about and contemplate Trinity. He also makes a strong point that the church has made a mistake by tiptoeing around the Trinity, by not acknowledging more vigorously the concept of Trinity and he feels that by making our theology two dimensional the church has unintentionally created a situation where you either believe or you don't, which means you either belong, or you don't. So many people are opting for don't and thus we have an ever-growing number of people who are choosing not to be swept up in the love of God Trinity invites us into. For him, it is the relationship of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit that invites us all to be part of that relationship, because the nature of that relationship is love.

Fr. Rohr may have a point worth considering, it is certainly challenging, and that also, is nothing new. Trinity has always been challenging. Some religions, including some branches of Christianity, have chosen to exclude the doctrine of Trinity for reasons of their own, one being the claim that the word Trinity does not appear in either the new or old testaments. But there are scholars and interpreters who might say that the word might not be in the scriptures, but Trinity is far from absent.

We saw in both the Gospel for today and in Paul's Second Letter to the Christians in Corinth direct reference to God as Father and Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus even seems to say this is God's name, as his followers are to baptize in God's name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Then he made that promise that has been a source of encouragement for Christians for thousands of years, I am with you always. This

beautiful promise could be challenged by asking how can Jesus be with us if he has ascended? Various attempts to answer may or may not work, the invitation of the Trinity might not directly answer the question, because it really doesn't work in the question/answer dichotomy, but it could be a way of living into the question.

Perhaps Trinity is at the heart of Jesus' powerful promise, a promise we can both read about in our Gospel and perhaps experience when we find ourselves swept up in the delightful mystery of God who loves us and wants nothing more than for us to accept God's invitation to join God in participating in that love. And when we find ourselves tasting such love it is only natural to want to invite others into it, such as when we tell our friends or family about that movie we loved, or music that moved us to tears, or the book we just couldn't put down.

In the end, there are no words I can say that will convince you to believe or help you understand Trinity. That's okay because I am not sure that is what sermons are really for anyway. Today, when some say it impossible to preach anything but heresy, perhaps the prayerful best way through is to remind you of God's invitation into God's never-ending love, however you might find it, to assure you God is with you, and pray you will be delightfully surprised to find yourselves swept up into that beautiful love. When you see it, I hope you will share with me.