

Trinity Sunday Year C June 16, 2019

What We Can't Know But We Can Share

The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

The summer before I started seminary, my rector scheduled me to preach a sermon to the parish I had grown up in and been an active member all my life. It was not just my last summer at my home parish; the rector was retiring at the end of that summer and wanted to be in the pulpit as often as he could as he had a special message he wanted us to hear. This meant it was tricky to find a Sunday he felt comfortable with someone else preaching. The day was picked, and my rector was incredibly supportive. He gave me lots of resource materials to help me prepare the sermon, some of which were the same ones he used.

As I started to diligently read, mark, and inwardly digest the scriptures for the day and the resource materials I began to get anxious. The lectionary for the day told me that the Sunday my rector had selected for me to preach on was none other than Trinity Sunday. I didn't know much about Trinity Sunday, except that every priest and deacon I knew told me how much they detested preaching on that day. But, I was young and smart and creative and am usually up for a challenge, so I just kept going, eager to preach, and just as eager to please my rector and the parish I had grown up in.

However, as I read the first line of the first commentary in the rather large resource pile my rector had given me, I panicked. "It is impossible to preach on the Trinity," the sentence stated, "without preaching heresy." Well that did it. I had failed before I had begun. There was no way I wanted to do anything wrong, and I certainly didn't want to commit heresy, a word loaded with history and dark consequences, a word connected to all the bad stuff in the church. In my distress, I did the most natural thing in the word: I called my rector to both protest and complain.

At first, he was startled, and claimed he hadn't realized the date was Trinity Sunday when he assigned me that day. He told me I could handle it, and only laughed at my worry that I was about to commit the serious crime of heresy. He told me I didn't know enough about Trinity to commit heresy; no one did. And went on to explain heresy is the crime of intentionally teaching something a person knows to be wrong in order to cause harm or destruction to the faith. The author of the sentence that upset me was making a point in a rather dramatic way that God, no matter how we describe God, is bigger than any of us, and therefore ultimately unknowable. That is the point of the day. Anyone who says they've got God neatly packed away in a box, even a Trinity shaped box, is someone to be suspicious of.

It was a good lesson, one I remember every Trinity Sunday when I start reading the scriptures appointed for the day and my own resource materials. Every once in a while, I'll come across the same dire warning about preaching heresy, and now I'm the one who laughs at the memory and my former fears.

Today might seem like an odd day on our Christian Calendar. A day we devote with scripture readings, prayers, hymns, and yes, even the sermon, to something we name as Trinity. The very Christian doctrine that God is Three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, One indivisible God. Despite it being considered doctrine, you could scour the scriptures in every language and you'll never find the word "trinity"; not even once. This has led some folks to dismiss the concept of Trinity completely.

In our modern times that are characterized with so much cynicism, suspicion, and anger at institutions, the mere mention of the word "doctrine" can get many people to raise a single eyebrow (either literally or metaphorically for those of us who lack the ability) in skepticism. Far too often that which is called doctrine has been proved to be false or manipulative or an attempt to keep knowledge or understanding from people. Doctrine can be seen as one of the Church's tools to keep people superstitious and dependent on the institution instead of enlightened, wise, and capable of free thinking and therefore free will. Historians tell us this is so. And for those times, I apologize on behalf of the church I serve. It was wrong. And it has done damage. There is nothing wrong with questioning, exploring, discovering.

Perhaps the problem any human being can fall into, no matter what institution they serve, is that as humans one of the things we yearn for is certainty. We want to be right. We want to know things and be able to trust that what we know is right, no matter what. That's how debates are won, right? That's how respect is earned, right? By being the smartest person in the room. The one who has all the answers. Isn't the answer we are often taught to avoid giving is, "I don't know."? Isn't not knowing a sign of failure to learn? Maybe that is why we humans can fear change so much. If things change, then what we thought we knew for certain might also change, and that can make us feel stupid. And no one wants that. I certainly didn't want to look stupid, or say anything that was wrong when I preached my first sermon on Trinity Sunday. I was afraid I wouldn't be right. And that might be the problem with the title doctrine; it can set up a feeling of defensiveness where instead of wanting to learn more, discover something new, we give ourselves a few words and call them right in order to feel comfortable about being certain we are right. But in so doing, can miss out on the intimacy of healthy relationships, the beauty of Mystery and the reality of God in our midst.

Days like Trinity Sunday show us that there are lots of things that are beyond our knowing, despite any amount of education, or reading, or experience, or watching TED Talks we do. We call these things Mysteries. And while Mysteries can't be figured out like puzzles, they can be engaged, explored, and interacted with.

The doctrine of the Trinity originated in the early church not as a set of words to be memorized and defended to the death, but as a way of naming how we human beings have experienced in this world in very tangible ways the Love of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These are not different gods, they are One God. If we try to wrap our heads around this, we'll get frustrated. Instead, we might see Trinity as an opportunity to reflect on how we have or have not experienced God: Who created the world and everything in the world, that means you and me, out of an incredibly dynamic and enthusiastic love; Who Became Incarnate, to Walk with Us as one of Us, to save us from ourselves and restore us to all God has ever really wanted, to be in loving relationship with us, and Who is still with us as this beautiful, inspiring Presence that can be a source of comfort, challenge, and calling, and connects us to God and to each other.

This may be what the early church fathers and mothers were getting at in naming God as Trinity: it is God as we engage with God, through worship, music, walks in the woods, in our relationships with each other, in those moments of pain and rejection, in the study of scriptures, in breathes of pure joy, in the beauty of a night sky full of stars, or a spectacular sunrise or sunset, in prayer, and that whisper of a possibility calling us to ministry that both terrifies and excites us at the same time. None of these things can make us certain about God, but they can help us feel closer to God, and learn to recognize and trust that God loves us. It is also how we can discern if the directions, inspiration, or ideas we receive are from God or not. If it is about resurrection life, then it is most likely from God. If it is about destruction for no reason, if it is without hope, then we need to be skeptical.

Perhaps Trinity points to the greatest miracle of all. That God who is so huge, so mysterious, so wonderful, so awesome, so much more than we can ever imagine, loves us tremendously. So much so that if we were to know just how incredible God is and just how fiercely God loves us, we'd never be able to bear it, just like Jesus told his disciples in this morning's Gospel. So perhaps, God gives us something better than knowing and certainty; God just gives us love that meets us wherever we are: hurt or scared or worried about making a mistake, or excited about something new, or happy, or overwhelmed, or bored or feeling lost or small, or calm or tired, or any of the myriad of ways we can feel or be, and in those moments is simply with us, whether or not we sense God, in the ridiculous hope that we will love God back by participating in that love.

That's one of the things we believe is at the heart of Holy Communion. And there are so many times when I place the Body of Christ in the outstretched hands of people I can sense that love. Sometimes when a little child eagerly reaches for the Bread with delighted eyes, I can see she might understand more than I with all my seminary education. What she is reaching for, and her quick consumption of the Body of our Lord is pure joy at recognizing love when she sees it. Little children aren't the only ones to experience this at Holy Communion. I see it in the tears of some, or the smile of others. That's exactly why we call it Holy Communion. Not everyone feels it every time, and that's okay. It doesn't mean it's not happening. Trinity Sunday reminds us God is bigger than we are, and God isn't dependent on our beliefs to exist, God exists despite what we believe. God does want to be with us, however God can.

Perhaps another way to think about it is to consider there are other things in this world that we are capable of understanding with certainty, but we don't need to in order to engage with them. For example, how many of you understand how the engine in a car, motorcycle, truck, or bus works? I've been surprised at the number of people who buy a new car and can't tell me what type of engine they have, because I know enough to know the type of engine a car has influences how that car will perform. But hundreds of people purchase vehicles every year without understanding what exactly is happening beneath the hood of that vehicle, and they engage with that vehicle just fine, driving or riding in it with perfect trust that vehicle will get them where they want to go. The same can be said for computers and devices. I admit I don't know nearly as much as I should about how my cell phone works, or my laptop. Despite this I engage with them all the time, I trust them and use them for everything: communications, work, research, writing, entertainment, even shopping.

While these things aren't mysterious the same way God is, my point is that not knowing doesn't have to prohibit participation. Just like not having a seminary education didn't prohibit me from preaching to the people I love about the love of God for them on that Trinity Sunday 15 years ago. God was with me then, as God is with us now, loving us as only God can, in ways we can never know, but we can experience and share.