

Trinity Sunday, 2007  
Nativity, Bethlehem

Sermons on the Trinity are supposed to be a little dry and incomprehensible, and I will try not to disappoint, although I am distracted from this ritual of obscure preaching by today's reality.

That is, in a few minutes there will be baptisms, and young lives will be washed "in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." This would be a good day to ask why. "In the name of" means in ancient languages possession and relationship, sort of like leaving your dry cleaning in the name of Smith, or making reservations in the name of Jones. In baptism we belong to and live in relationship to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Jesus is heard in the gospel passage today saying that it would take a while for his followers to digest everything he taught, and some things they just weren't ready for. Sure enough, the Spirit led the church through the centuries to digest what it had seen and heard in the story. It took them about 350 years to get to major agreement that what has been revealed to us about God is ... a mystery we can only struggle to describe but are invited to contemplate with wonder, love, and praise.

This shouldn't surprise me, because I don't know anybody, especially those I love the most, who doesn't stay far beyond my ability to explain, dissect, or taxonomize. As I grow in relationship to people I learn more about them, but there is nobody whose internal life is completely transparent to me. In fact, to say, "I know all about you," or worse, "I know what you're thinking," is probably the most arrogant thing a person can utter, and is destructive of relationships. It's like saying that someone is fixed for all time, and that by understanding them I have mounted and stuffed on the wall over my mental fireplace.

We do it all the time. Let's see, if I know you are a Capricorn, know your race and sex, your Myers-Briggs type, your enneagram, where

you were born, your blood type, your political affiliation, your education and income, your neighborhood, and whether you root for the Phillies or Yankees—I don't know you, but may think I do.

In our history with someone we love, in our most intimate moments with them, in working with them, suffering and rejoicing with them, we come to know them on many levels. From what they reveal and what we experience of them, we get enough hints about them to have a general picture and make a commitment. Certainly we come to understand people we love to some degree, but if you really love somebody, you have to do two things:

- 1 honor their uniqueness (they aren't part of you), and
- 2 and this is the test, number two, you take great and unspeakable pleasure in just thinking about their mysterious otherness in which you to some degree commune but will never fathom.

If you think you have your beloved all figured out, you are missing a very great deal of life. When they cease to be a mystery, there's little left to adore...or to attract.

So they didn't come up with an impossible definition of God in order to show that they are theologians to frustrate us, or to subsidize the clover, triangle, or pretzel industry. From what scripture told them and from what they experienced, Ancient creeds (based on baptismal liturgies) express a general picture and made a commitment.

That took about 350 years, and they came down on the side of an explanation of our encounter with the triune God that invites adoration and contemplation rather than theological taxidermy. The Old Testament lesson encourages adoration and contemplation as a kind of joy, and that's what I was working on in the children's sermon today.

The complex talk of what developed in the church has several important functions for us. The most important is that it is one and the

same God who creates, redeems and vivifies us. The history of the world, OUR HISTORY, is of one piece.

The second is that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, far from being stuffed and mounted like the utterly dependable and never-changing gods of the Greeks and Romans, are in a constant relationship, an eternal community, a kind of dance with each other. In fact a Greek word for “dance” is very close to the word for the constant embrace and community of the persons and has inspired some fruitful thinking..

A big part of what the church confesses about Father, Son, and Spirit is that they stay distinct but are one and live in dynamic community whose mission statement is the life of the world, our life.

To be baptized into that relationship is to be baptized into God’s eternal embrace and God’s eternal working for the life of the world. It is to be in relationship with a God whom we cannot fully understand, yet whom we understand enough to trust as the center of our living.

What does this look like on the ground?

The epistle pushes all this a step beyond and says that life baptized into this God gives peace; Paul’s Jewishness is showing when he uses that word for wholeness, reconciliation, and well-being. He goes on to say it touches glory.

Then he brags about the fact that if you follow the way of this God, you will suffer. Certainly he is right. Just letting the other “persons” in your life be distinct will make you suffer! Being a person of Jesus’s compassion and integrity will make you suffer! Being generous in a world that emphasizes self will make you suffer! Being faithful to your commitments and your standards will make you suffer. Being open to those undefined new ideas that Jesus half-scares us with in the Gospel will make us suffer. Witness to the gospel will make you suffer.

And St. Paul, who understood like nobody else what God had

been up to on the cross, says taking that road less traveled, of embracing the very real but usually very small moments of pain that come with being faithful, will change us. Day by day.

Just as the triune God of Christians is not a photograph but a community, a dance, baptism plunges us into a life-long dance, and day by day we grow. If that has stopped in your life, this is one of those moments when your priests are here for you to help you struggle deeper into the baptismal reality.

And what's in this for us?

St. Paul says that living this life builds character, and character is what makes the difference between people and louts. And character, he says, gives hope. I think that means walking through the world patient with the working of God's plan, tuned to seeing it develop, and finding the mere consideration of God a blessing. That's why the last prayer we pray over the newly baptized asks that they (and we) have "joy and wonder in all God's works."

Bottom line: Trinity talk is the invitation to live in relation with and adoration of the community that is at the heart of the universe, and to participate in the live of what and who we cannot master but in which we can certainly delight.

I apologize if my obscurity has not been perfect, but you will admit that I've tried.