

Trinity Sunday Year C

May 31, 2015

John 3:1-17

There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

It has been said (indeed, I myself have said it!) that Trinity Sunday is the only Sunday of the Church Year devoted to a doctrine – the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

But I no longer think of the Trinity as a doctrine, for the Holy Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three Persons in one Being – is not doctrine, but Divine Reality. And **that** is what we celebrate today: not a *doctrine*, but God himself, herself.

The Holy Trinity is a “mystery”; yet not a mystery in the sense that we most often *use* that word: as meaning something unknown, or a problem to which we don’t know the answer. Look up the word “mystery” in *Webster’s Dictionary (9th Collegiate)*, and the very first definition is: “a religious truth which one can know only by revelation and cannot fully understand.” One can *know*, but not fully *understand*!

Have you ever *known* something, but not **understood** it? I think we *all* have! When you fall in love with the most wonderful person in the world, and that person falls in love with you, you **know** that that love is more *real* than anything else you have ever experienced. But do you *understand* it? You may *know* that your loved one loves you, and yet not *begin* to **understand** how anyone so wonderful could ever love a klutz like you. It is a mystery: you *know* it by experience, by revelation, but you do not understand it. Yet we sophisticated human beings have had a strong tendency to think that if we don't *understand* something, it is not real.

And so it is that some of the giants of Christian theology down through the centuries have developed complicated theories about the Trinity. St. Augustine posited his *psychological model* of the Trinity; Thomas Aquinas a *scholastic* model. In the 20th Century, Karl Barth spoke of the Trinity in terms of *modes of being*, and Karl Rahner spoke of *manners of subsisting*. It's enough to make your head swim. I begin to sympathize with the Unitarians!

And yet, though you and I are not theologians, we, too, live most of our lives in our heads (at least I know I do!); and so we, also, try to wrap our heads around the mystery of the Trinity. We seek out analogies, similes, metaphors: the Trinity is like a three-leaf clover, which is three leaves in one stem; or like H₂O, which is manifested as ice, water, or steam. We inevitably wind up being frustrated at the total inadequacy of these attempts, perhaps even convinced that the whole matter is absurd – for *none* of these analogies, while perhaps at some level helpful, involve experience or revelation. And the Trinity can only be truly **known** in revelation and experience. Theologian Catherine LaCugna states that “Theories about what God is apart from God's [communicating God's self] in salvation history remain unverifiable and ultimately untheological.” In other words, what we **know** about God *must* come from God's revelation of God's self, and our *experience* of God. In today's Gospel, Jesus says to Nicodemus, “we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen.” But Nicodemus is not trying to know; he is trying to *understand*, and how does one understand the mysteries of God? This is why he is on a totally different plane than Jesus in this Gospel conversation.

In a video on The Apostle's Creed which we watched a few years ago in our adult class, Anglican bishop N.T. Wright said: “That our theology is straining at the borders of language is not something to be ashamed about.” Words may be inadequate, but even **Jesus** used them to *try* to communicate the mysteries of God – like he does in today's Gospel. One word, first used to elucidate the Trinity in the 8th Century, is the Greek word *perichoresis*. It means “to interpenetrate”, “to indwell”, “to permeate”. The three Persons of the Trinity mutually indwell, permeate, interpenetrate one another. *Jesus* uses this kind of language over and over in John's Gospel to describe his relationship with his heavenly Father. No less than three times in John's Gospel, Jesus says, “I am in the Father, and the Father is in me.” A very *similar* Greek word, *perichoreuein*, also used by

scholars and mystics in reference to the Trinity, means “to dance around”; and it is *this* word which several *modern* theologians have used to speak about the relation between the three Persons of the Trinity. C.S. Lewis writes: “In Christianity, God is not a static thing... but a dynamic, pulsating activity, a life, almost a kind of drama... a kind of dance.” (*Mere Christianity*)

To permeate; interpenetrate; to dance around; a dynamic, pulsating activity! How *different* are these **active** images from the *static* images we so often use! A three-leaf clover just sits there; but the oneness of the Trinity should not be understood as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit *sitting* together. When Jesus says, “I am in the Father and the Father is in me”, he doesn’t mean that he is in the Father the way water is in a bucket.

One scholar writes: “*perichoresis* describes the Persons [of the Trinity] as eternally giving themselves over into one another. It is not that the Father has (at some ‘moment’ in eternity past) poured Himself out into the Son [and therefore they are ‘one’ in some *static* sense], but that He is *continually* pouring Himself into the Son, and the Son into the Spirit, and the Spirit into the Father, and so on. To talk about God’s ‘perichoretic’ unity is to talk about a *dynamic* unity, and to talk about a God who is always at work, always in motion, pure act.” (Peter J. Leithart, “The Dance of God, the Dance of Life”)

To say that the Father is eternally pouring Himself out into the Son, and the Son into the Spirit, is to say, at the very least, that the unity of the Trinity derives from intimately loving relationship between persons. At the heart of the Godhead, the very source of its unity, is loving relationship. Now, one does not have loving relationship only with oneself, or pour oneself out eternally into oneself – unless one is a schizophrenic narcissist. To say that there is loving relationship at the heart of the Godhead must mean that there is more than one *person* at the heart of the Godhead – and that is the way the early Christians *experienced* God. Now, to monotheists, like the Jews of Jesus’ day (and most all of Jesus’ 12 disciples were Jews), any *hint* of **more** than one person in the Godhead would have seemed heretical. Yet they couldn’t get around it: this was how they *experienced* God; this was how God was *revealed* to them; this is Whom they had come to *know* God to be. To say that God was Father AND Son AND Holy Ghost was difficult indeed for those Jews who repeated several times a day, “The Lord your God the Lord is One”. They experienced God as Father, as Son, and as Holy Spirit; but they also experienced him as One. And so it is that they came to speak of the Trinity – three Persons, one God. No logical philosopher would ever have come up with this paradoxical statement; it had to have its basis in an undeniable experience of God.

What does this have to do with you and I? We learn from Genesis that humanity was created in the image of God, which means, therefore, in the image of the Trinity. Like the unique Persons of the Trinity, each of *us* is a unique person. And as at the heart of the Godhead is loving relationship between Persons, so at

the heart of true humanity is loving relationship between persons. We, like the Persons of the Trinity, are poised in the balance between being independent individuals and pouring ourselves out toward the other. It is the Divine Dance; and in that dance is our freedom – freedom not *from* others, but freedom to be oneself for the *sake* of the other; living God's life with one another – life within the Holy Trinity.

AMEN