

The Trinity

Delivered May 30, 2009

Psalm 8 and 1 Corinthians 13:8-13

Imagine that it's very early morning on a Saturday. You are up early. You have fixed yourself a cup of coffee and you are out on your deck, or your porch, sitting on a lawn chair and enjoying a time of quiet. It rained the night before and now a fog drapes over you like a warm, gray shawl. Not too far away, you are able to decipher what you think are deer—one, two three, four of them. They are nosing their way through the dense, humid air. You can see the barest outline of their faces—those faces look like chiseled forms in rocks, except that you can detect the flick of an ear; you see a young one turn its head so that you can discern its profile. It occurs to you that this is the way it must have been when creation dawned—the fog and the quiet, and the hint of life, the deer, a mirage of sorts—life not yet manifest in the world. You mull over what you remember from Genesis. You remember God said, let there be—let there be-- whatever, land, water, light, fish, creeping things, and so on. And it was all good. And you are reminded of the Psalms—Psalm 8—when I look to the heavens, the work of your fingers...Yes, God created all of this. In this time of quiet, sitting on your deck or your porch you suddenly feel very small—You are no more than a flea resting on the backside of an elephant. You are very much aware of the presence and the magnificence of God.

Now imagine that as you continue to sit in deep spiritual reverie, the fog begins to lift—just a little. You can make out the form of your neighbor walking the stretch of land between his house and your house. He is taking his morning constitutional. You realize that in a very few moments he will be at your door—asking you to join him. But here's the thing. This neighbor is a professor of theology. He is writing a book, in fact, on Christian doctrine. He occasionally shares his insights with you. Now I ask you

As a good Christian who practices good Christian hospitality, do you

- A) go inside and pull on your walking shoes eager to meet your neighbor and share with him the glory of this morning—engaging him in conversation about what Christian doctrine has to say about God and creation? or
- B) Do you stay very, very still and out of sight.? You hope that your neighbor, after knocking at your front door for a time, concludes that you are sleeping in. You hope that your neighbor goes on his way allowing you to continue your morning communion with God and creation?

If you said A, most of us here, including me, would say you are a fool. Spiritual moments are so precious, and so “feel good,” that we would say that they are to be valued above, yes, even above practicing good Christian hospitality. Then, too, when you are in God's presence, when you are having a spiritual moment with God, who needs a theologian to chase that moment away with three and four syllable words—words like homoousia, or hypostasis? Spirituality moves the heart as does good poetry or music and your heart has definitely been moved. Doctrine and dogma, like that argued by your neighbor are boring, lifeless and dry, dry, dry. There is a very good

reason so many people claim to be spiritual but not religious. They don't want their spirituality ruined by what amounts to heady, religious conjecture.

That is not to say, however, that my week of contemplation on the trinity, in preparation for this sermon, has been totally dry and spiritless. A funny thing happened as I delved into my old seminary Christian Doctrine textbooks. As I had been in seminary, once again I was startled by the words that theologians use to describe the triune nature of God. These words aren't dry at all. They read like poetry. Listen to these descriptions, taken from several textbooks: the trinity is free, self-communicating love; it is creative, sacrificial, empowering love; it is shared life; it represents fecundity and dynamism; The trinity moves in an exquisite divine dance; It is a living process of mutual self-surrendering love." Beautiful, don't you think?

Before we get into a full blown discussion of the triune nature of God, however, it makes sense to talk a little bit about why we even need to engage in this exercise. You know and I know that it is impossible to fathom who or what God really is. As Paul says, when we try to see God, it's as if we are looking into a mirror, dimly—we see only our faint image reflected back at us. We try to find words to describe the one who is above all and in all—we attach adjectives beginning with omni's and i-m-m s when we speak of God—omni meant to imply more than human—and i-m-m meant to imply other-than-human. So we get adjectives like: omnipotent and omniscient; or immortal and immovable; but these adjectives really don't tell us very much about God's nature at all. How omnipotent is omnipotent? Omnipotent enough to move mountains? Omnipotent enough to cure my disease? Omnipotent enough to smite my enemies? And what does immortal mean? How can something have no ending or beginning? As someone has said "when human beings try to describe God, it's like a bunch of oysters trying to describe a ballerina." Or, it's like penguins trying to describe the hula or a frog trying to describe the works of Johannes Sebastian Bach.

Yet, if you know anything about our Presbyterian founder, John Calvin, you know that he insists, right there in the opening chapter of his Institutes, that we can't know ourselves unless we know something of God, and we can't know something about God, unless we know ourselves. God really IS the ground of our being. Even if our concept of God is grossly in error, as assuredly it is, at least we have something on which to build our lives. For good or for ill, the life you lead will be influenced by whom or by what you believe God to be.

Last year, a bright and curious toddler, student at the preschool, wandered into my office while his mother was engaged in a conversation with someone out in Cove Hall's hallway. We had a nice little chat. He was very interested in my shoes and my computer. After awhile his mother came to retrieve him. The mother was mortified that her son was bothering me—which of course he wasn't. He would touch something in my office—the computer cord, a book—and his mother would say, perhaps for my benefit? "Put that down. Jesus wouldn't want you to touch that." She used that phrase several times. He was a curious little boy. I wondered to myself then and I still wonder, "What concept of Jesus would that little boy grow up to own? How would his concept of a punishing, judging Jesus shape his life?" Again, it matters how we conceive of God.

And now we come to the heart of the matter: the whys and wherefores our Christian forefathers devised the concept of the trinity as a way to describe God. And note, it was devised by our Christian forefathers—the trinity is never mentioned in the New Testament. If we are in blaming mode, the most we can lay on our New Testament authors is that they do mention God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit—but as distinct entities—never as a three-in-one proposition.

Our Christian forefathers beginning with their first meeting at the Council of Nicea in the early 300's are responsible for devising the idea of trinity. Of the 250 to 300 men in attendance, all but two wanted to proclaim Jesus a God—rather than a prophet. Those patriarchs realized that Jesus had added to what we had formerly known about God. Well, not exactly—what Jesus taught about God is IN the Old Testament, but just not in bold letters. Jesus, as a manifestation of God in human form, highlighted God's self-sacrificing nature—Jesus proved to us on the cross that God understands human suffering—indeed, that God, too, suffers. And Jesus highlighted the fact that God is everywhere present in the world, not just above the world or in the world, but IN each of us, working through the power of the Holy Spirit.

That's the original why of the trinity-- but modern day theologians have hit on something that makes the trinity even more pertinent to our understanding of God—and therefore of ourselves. (Remember, Calvin). Modern day theologians stress that God to be God, must exist in relationship. As one theologian says, “the unity of the triune God is not mere mathematical oneness but a living unity which includes diversity.”

How is the **divine relationship** of united diversity supposed to work? This triune God does not exist with Jesus and the Holy spirit in a top down authoritative relationship: God, Jesus and Holy Spirit—so forget that image of God sitting on a heavenly, kingly throne, with a little Jesus perhaps, sitting on God's right hand—nor is the trinity like a triangle or a pyramid—with God at the apex. If you are married to the idea of the triangle, think triangle but lying horizontally. It may be best, though, to lay aside your notion of triangle altogether. Many modern day theologians are moving more toward the image of a circle, to explain the triune God. God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit move together as in a divine circle dance. There is no fear or hatred, no come-uppance among the three—just mutual love. This perfect relationality, or community, this mutual love is what we are to imitate in our own lives. Modern-day theologians will even go so far as to say that it is in this way that we are created in God's image—like God, we, too, are made for relationship.

Note, though, that all of what we have been talking about is up for grabs. This talk must stay in the realm of conjecture. Everything we posit about God must be rooted in our limited human perspective. As Paul says, only when we die will we get to see God face to face. Now we know only in part—when we die, then we will know fully.

Until then, we make do with our poor attempts to describe God. Yes, we are like oysters trying to dance the Nut Cracker Suite, we are as penguins wearing grass skirts and attempting to dance the hula, or we are like frogs endeavoring to pound out a Bach sonata on a teenie weenie keyboard. The task is too much for us, and we will surely fail, yet must we keep on trying. For you as for me. Amen

