

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
Trinity Sunday
22 May 2016

Scripture readings:

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

Psalm 8

Romans 5:1-5

John 16:12-15

In the life of the Church today is unusual because we're usually celebrating something to do with the life or ministry of Jesus, so from Advent to Christmas we're waiting with a pregnant Mary for the birth of Jesus and the incarnation in human flesh, and then we spend Lent before Easter contemplating the passion, suffering and death of Jesus. Then we get to Easter, the resurrection, the post-resurrection appearances throughout Easter, peekaboo until Pentecost comes, last Sunday, the descent of the Holy Spirit - all of this stuff to do with the life and work of Jesus. But today is probably unique in the life of the Church in that it's one Sunday in which we contemplate a theological idea, a theological premise. Today we celebrate the Holy Trinity, a word which, by the way, you will not find in scripture. And if you have Jewish and Muslim friends, and I hope you have both, you as Christians stand with them as a member of the great three monotheistic traditions in the world, the traditions that claim to have one God. But I challenge you as a Christian who today celebrates the theology, the idea, the theory, the understanding in the Church of the Holy Trinity, I encourage you, in fact I defy you to defend Christianity as monotheism to a Jew or a Muslim.

They've got one God. "*Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one.*" "*Allah is one God.*" We all share the same God. Can you imagine their difficulty when they come to Christians who say, "*We have one God*" and then we depict God as two men and a bird. Really! [*laughter*] A Father, a Son and a Holy Spirit. The Spirit is always depicted as a bird. Two men and a bird.

It was interesting this morning in Rome: The pope referred to the Trinity as "a family." Fascinating idea, isn't it? The idea of the Holy Trinity doesn't come to us or to the Church easily or quickly. And I suppose and in fact I *hope* we are all still working on what it is we believe, think, teach and understand about God.

Our first hymn today was a theological treatise set to music and there are others. And one that we use virtually every Sunday except today because Art asked me to do something today that we don't usually do. So I thought, "*Where can we put the commemoration of the Toys' 52nd wedding anniversary? Oh good, there's a chance to drop the creed for a week.*" On Holy Trinity Sunday! I wasn't thinking very clearly, was I? But we got that first hymn so we're covered.

The Church has these creeds which come to us. They're not biblical texts. The Nicene Creed, which we use most often, is from around 325, from the fourth century, and it's believed that the Nicene Creed was developed to counteract and respond to a growing and popular heresy in the Church at the time known as Arianism. Do we have any Arians in the church today? We might. What's Arian? We need to go back to Arius who opposed the understanding in the Church of the divinity of Jesus. So the Church said, "*That's not right.*" So we get these creeds being developed and evolving which defend the divinity of Jesus and insist that Jesus be considered a part of the godhead. So now you've got two men, right? A Father/Creator and a Son/Redeemer. And then last week we celebrated Pentecost, the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Church. And the Church believes that that Spirit is of God. The texts we read today and have been reading are about how we will not be abandoned by God even though Jesus has died, been buried, raised, and disappeared in the ascension, never to be seen again. But the assurance that comes to the Church that God is always with you and then those extraordinary images of the Spirit descending as tongues of fire on the heads of the early apostles. We had balloons floating in here last week to celebrate Pentecost. In the middle of the week I thought I never explained why. It was a feeble attempt to make it look like tongues of fire.

So what is Trinity and Trinity Sunday all about? There are still the other kind of Arians - not the German, white, blond-haired, blue-eyed Aryan folk that Hitler meant. This is a completely different use of the word Arian based on the name of Arius who may have been a bishop. I don't recall. If you have friends who are Jehovah's

Witnesses, they probably would be considered Arians. And there might be a faithful Episcopalian among us. Who knows? A Lutheran, Presbyterian, and possibly a Baptist who might agree with the Arian point of view. When I was in seminary we studied heresies. Every time I read a new heresy I agreed with it. *[laughter]* It was like medical students who read about diseases and you *have* them!

All of that pointing to the reality that in the 2,000 years of the life of the Church people have thought hard about who God is, what God means to us, and how does God continue to be a living and effective and important reality in our lives today. The festival of the Holy Trinity was finally promulgated by some pope in around 1334 under pressure from other people in the Church to make a point of this doctrine of the Trinity and to set aside a Sunday - the Sunday after Pentecost was just as good as any because it hadn't been taken by any other celebration - to pause to remember and think about the theological realities of who it is we imagine God to be and how it is over the centuries God has been perceived as real and active and effective in the lives of people who've come to believe in God and in this Trinitarian formula.

So around 325 the Nicene Creed is developed to combat the heresy of Arianism. And there are loads of other creeds. One of them that I used to use in my first parish on Trinity Sunday, which is prescribed in the liturgical behaviors of the Church for use at morning prayer on Trinity Sunday, is known as the Athanasian Creed. I couldn't find it in the prayer book so I resorted to the principle authority of the whole Church which is *The Lutheran Book of Worship, 1978 [laughter]* where you will find the Athanasian Creed printed in full in its translation into English on pages 54 and 55. When I used this in my first parish, I had people come to me and say, "*Would you please never use that again.*" Because, in fact, it is offensive to everyone else in the world who doesn't quite agree with every jot and tittle of this, and my guess is neither would you. Listen to some of this language:

*Whoever wants to be saved should above all cling to the catholic faith.
(That's not Roman Catholic. Come on Protestants, get over it!)
Whoever does not guard it whole and inviolable will doubtless perish eternally.
Now this is the catholic faith: We worship one God in trinity and the Trinity in unity,
neither confusing the persons nor dividing the divine being.
For the Father is one person, the Son is another, and the Spirit is still another.
But the deity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one, equal in glory,
coeternal in majesty.
What the Father is, the Son is, and so is the Holy Spirit...."*

Very detailed thinking and the kind of thought patterns that we don't even use anymore.

*Those who have done good will enter eternal life.
Those who have done evil will enter eternal fire.*

So who's the Savior? At the end of all of this, and there's much that I have not read:

This is the catholic faith. One cannot be saved with believing this firmly and faithfully.

Salvation by what you think, not by what God does. So there have been times when the Trinity did become an important issue in the life of the Church because other things had been taking the place of God. Other people had been taking, according to some thinkers - we call them Reformers - taking the place of God in the Church and primary among those were the saints and particularly Mary. The cult of Mary was extraordinarily important in the Medieval Church, and there is still an importance attributed to Mary even in the Western Church, and I believe there is still some movement in places in the Church to elevate Mary to the position of co-redemptrix, that her role is parallel and important to the role of Jesus in the salvation of the world. It's the kind of stuff that drives Protestants mad. But in a Church which has only ever provided for the imagination of believers two men and a bird, at this point

in the 20th century - when we might even get a woman in the White House finally - where is the feminine aspect of the Almighty? How can we expect the Church to be relevant to women if the primary example we give them is of a birth-giving virgin? It just doesn't happen that way.

When we say that holiness is constituted on something happening physiologically in this world about which and around which we construct and celebrate the business that Art and Sandy are going to bring to the altar in a minute which is their personal, physical, child-producing, emotional, cultural, religious, sexual reality - because their kids are here! And, if you ask me, every human being and every human birth is an extraordinary miracle. So when as the Church we continue through time and space and dare to think about things, it seems to me that it is fair for us to re-evaluate stuff, not necessarily to junk it but to say, "*Hey now, wait a minute.*" You have to have somebody to fight with, right? Or somebody with whom to grow up, or somebody from whom to grow away. And if the festival of the Holy Trinity which is an invitation for us to think about the unimaginable, an invitation for us to think about the largeness of God and the extraordinary breadth and depth and quality of Divine Love - starting with that love for ourselves which brings each and every one of us into being in the first place, how dare we say to another, "*One cannot be saved without agreeing with what I believe,*" when I'm not sure what it is I believe myself because I am limited as a human being in my understanding. But if what I say about God is that she is not limited - Oh, you mean your God has trousers on - if what we say about God which is where I think we can start and agree - that God is larger than all of this mess, then we can start to imagine a God who can love my enemy as much as she can love me. It's called starting our theology in the humility of admitting who we are and who we are not in the first place.

And so maybe today is just as good a day as any to say two men and a bird have worked for a long time but they need some reconsideration - or *she* needs some reconsideration or God needs some reconsideration because I cannot get it all, I do not get it all, and if I say I do I will instantaneously be a hypocrite.

So we are called as the Church to believe that we have a God who in fact creates the world. We are called to believe on the basis of the experience of the Twelve Apostles, the early Church, and our own experience with each other to believe we have a God who saves the world because we know when we try to do that, it really doesn't work, does it? We're pretty bad at being saviors. We're also from time to time pretty bad at being saved because we think we *have* to be the savior. And sometimes we're pretty bad at believing in God the Holy Spirit who comes into the world as God's continuing presence and says God will live in this world in one way that we're sure of, and Christians call it incarnation - that the only way we can really get a grasp, a handle, a hold on God is by knowing God in the flesh, incarnate. So we spend a lot of energy and we deal with a lot of junk at the 25th of December to remember the birth of Jesus 2,000 years ago but often forget the reality in the Church that the incarnation means that God intends to "*be born in us today,*" that the incarnation is the business of God being alive and active in the world today in that person whom you saw in the bathroom mirror this morning even before you put on your glasses - that pathetic sack of flesh is God's choice for a residence in this world now. In the Church we say that Baptism invites us to believe that together we constitute the Body of Christ by pooling our resources to make God both visible, present, active and serving in the world today as we work together. Now that's a kind of creed that I don't have much trouble with.

Frankly I'm glad we've set aside the creed today so that at that point in the liturgy Sandy and Art can come forward and say - I'm not stealing their thunder but this is exactly what I think they're saying: "*We have seen God in each other. In you God has been present to me in a way that God has never been present to me before or since, and for that I am grateful to you and to God, and I am glad that God's family, the Trinity, has constituted between us a family. And I'm not 'toying' with you.*" [laughter] This is the truth, and so that's what we will do now.

One last thing about the Trinity. You may have seen in the bulletin that our friend John Wilson has probably by now already celebrated the primary Mass at the Cathedral in Bristol, England, which was an honor given to him in celebration of the 60th anniversary of his ordination. So he was ordained eight years before you were married.

Now you want to talk about *old!* [laughter]

I wish to read this to you about the Cathedral in Bristol written by a man whose name is J.C.J. Metford whose books I'd known before I knew him. He's dead now, but he lived in Bristol. When I found out he was there, the Canon made it possible for me to meet and spend time with him. Well, in tribute to the Trinity and the Canon saying the Mass at Bristol, England:

Devotion to the Trinity was introduced in England after the Norman Conquest in 1066. It was intensified after St. Thomas Becket, consecrated Archbishop in 1162 in the Trinity Chapel of Canterbury Cathedral (which was later destroyed by fire), ordered that the most Holy Trinity should be honored on that day throughout his province to commemorate his elevation. The re-dedication in 1542 of the Church of the Monastery of St. Augustine in Bristol as the Cathedral of the Most Holy and Undivided Trinity and foundations such as Trinity College, Cambridge, show that ascription to the Holy Trinity was seen by the Reformers in England as a means of countering the excessive veneration of saints. Similar dedications of some 230 churches built in England in the 19th century illustrate the avoidance of saints' names by the evangelical party in the Church in England - lest you think that churches aren't political - and you will look hard to find any Lutheran churches in this country named St. Mary.

As a final comment on this, one of the oldest churches in the United States of America, chartered in 1696 by King William and Mary, stands at the head of Wall Street on Broadway in New York and is named Trinity.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.