

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
Trinity Sunday
11 June 2017

Scripture readings:

Genesis 1-2:4a

2 Corinthians 13:11-13

Matthew 28:16-20

Today is an interesting day in the life of the Church. We've finished the entire cycle now since before Christmas of remembering the birth, the ministry, the life, the passion, the death, the burial, the resurrection, and the ascension of Jesus, and last week the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Today is known as the Festival of the Celebration and Commemoration of the Holy Trinity. This is the only day in the entire life of the Church, the only Sunday, that is set aside to commemorate a theological idea, a theological understanding by Christian people who talk about - and we talk very blithely about this - the Holy Trinity.

If you have Jewish and Muslim friends or any other kind of monotheistic friends, I dare you to ask them whether or not they think Christianity is monotheistic. Go ahead, explain it! It's been tried for centuries. This is a sort of impossible position we're in as Christians - calling ourselves monotheists and then referring to God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. You know my punch line on this: two men and a bird.

Well, if you want to see how really complex it gets around the sixth or seventh century, open your prayer book to page 864, and there you will find in small print something which is commonly known as the Athanasian Creed. Do not read it before you go to bed. *[laughter]* It will scare the living bejabbers out of you. *[laughter]* And it is felt by some that Athanasius - whoever he was - had absolutely nothing to do with the production of this.

Another cause for division in the Church - the Eastern Church does not use this creed as it has been used in the past by the Western Church because it contains the *filioque* clause. Now that's something to fight about, isn't it? You all know about that. Well, if you're not going to fight about that, you can fight about *homoousios*, and that has nothing to do with sex. *[laughter]* *Homoousios* is "made of one substance." We talk about one substance with the Father. That's *homoousios*. *Filioque* - the Holy spirit who proceeds from the Father and *filioque*, the Son. Now these are important theological matters that have divided the Church and given cause for hatred, prejudice or bloodshed and ecumenical efforts ever since. Who's got the right idea about God and who God is? And particularly as Christians, the big question is, "*Who do you think Jesus is or was or should have been?*"

And that's where we come up with this Trinity business when people who knew Jesus started to develop ideas about what his importance really was. And when they agreed that he was important, of course they had to figure out who were better friends than others. You know how it goes. Which of your children do you love better, mother? A question no child ever asks unless he or she is sure before he asks. We all know that we're the favorite.

As the Church evolves and we develop over the centuries, these ideas about who Jesus was and what our relationship to Jesus is and what Jesus' relationship to God is, the idea comes that this man was, in fact, part of the godhead. And then we kill each other about that.

The announcements were extraordinarily long this morning which prompted Vito to ask, "*Are we going to have a sermon, too?*" *[laughter]* The answer to which is "Yes!" *[laughter]*

This whole evolution of the idea of who Jesus is starts with the early Church. The idea is evolved that Jesus is, in fact, part of the godhead, and then we fight with each other about how much that means, what that means, and who belongs to Jesus, and therefore Jesus becomes the gate and the only way to salvation and the person on whom your salvation depends.

Yesterday I visited Aunt Gertrude and she said, "*I have something that I think you dropped.*" She handed it to me and it was a one million dollar bill. *[laughter]* It had the face of Ben Franklin on it. It looked for the world like a real bill for a million dollars. On the back in small print there was all this kind of religious

garbage about if you have ever said a naughty word, committed a sin. The big question is are you going to heaven? I can't read the rest of it; it's just too disgusting. So I gave it to my great nephew to play with.

It's what brings us to where we are today from how we feel with these evolutions of ideas, and what really is problematic for me is that we think because somebody else has thought about that for two thousand years, we are either excused from that process or what it is we think has nothing to do with what's really important about things like going to hell or loving your neighbor.

John's observation was that the first lesson was nearly as long as the announcements (but the announcements *were* longer). Why on Trinity Sunday would we spend all of that time to read the entire history of creation? I think the reason is clear: no matter what you think about Jesus and the godhead and the Trinity and all the rest of it, I think this is a question that is being posed directly and primarily to you and me who say we are Christians, and in some cases have these quite cockamamy ideas about who Jesus was. The question is not "*Do you believe in Jesus?*" not "*Is Jesus your religion?*" but "*Is Jesus' religion your religion?*" I don't worry so much about what you think about Jesus. I am really concerned about what you think about what Jesus believed. And then make of him what you want, and if it needs to be God, go right ahead. But don't skip the important part of paying attention to what it was Jesus believed.

And what did Jesus believe? Plain and simple, the first page of Holy Scripture, what we read today. He believed a couple of simple things. He believed that God was the Creator of the whole shootin' match - no matter how you divide that or understand that..

Donna has shared a book with me which I'm re-reading which is an extraordinary trip through our history as Christians. A hundred years before the Protestant Reformation a man went to monastery libraries to find manuscripts of classical literature written before Jesus was born which were probably suppressed by the Church because the Church didn't agree with those crazy ideas about who God was and what all that meant. And so instead of saying, "*We differ from this and this is how,*" they just crushed it all and buried it. But you'll be surprised to know that before Christ was born there was an idea among philosophers that the world was composed of atoms - that's atoms, not Adams. They were Epicureans of course - that's not Christian. When you read about that understanding of creation - before Christ - you realize that people had serious thought about things for a very, very long time.

And by the way, friends, we should be engaged in the same thing. As faithful people I think we need to be really careful about taking a posture as Christians that makes us so much different from the rest of the world that all we are reduced to is seeing anybody who doesn't agree with us - consequently, the creeds to tell you who agrees and who doesn't - and anybody who doesn't agree with us is going to hell. You hear that kind of language on radio and television - the soldiers of God. We finally got *Onward, Christian Soldiers* out of the hymnal for a reason.

So what was the religion of Jesus? It's pretty simple stuff. He confesses a belief in God who is the Creator of the world in which he lived, who loved everything she created: the worms, the birds, the termites, the robins - their eggs, their nests - the trees, the people. And the one thing different about the creation of people in this story is that people - you and I - are the only pieces of creation in which God creates an image of himself. At every moment, every event of creation, God stops, looks at what was created, and says, "*This is good! I love what I make. I love my creation. I love all of it. I love my children. I love all of them!*"

Jesus' religion. No *homoousios*, no *filioque*, no Father, Son and Holy Spirit, no Promised Land. The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it belongs to God. Now what?

Well, we look at what happens to Jesus when he believes that. And that's all he believes. That's all Jesus believes, I think. The Church of his day, the society of his day, the government of his day, the economy of his day, the politics of his day cannot stand that radical understanding of who God is and who everybody in the world is - so they kill him. It's that simple.

It is still a radical idea today - maybe even more so today than ever before - to believe that everybody else in the world is as much a daughter and son of God as I might be. Is that enough religion for us? My guess is it will take me longer than the rest of my life to really appreciate that because that includes my enemies. That

includes people who are different from me. No, that doesn't give anybody a right to hurt anybody else, but it doesn't give me a pass card, a card of permission to be afraid of or dislike anybody else because she or he is different from me. If I believe that someone who is so different from me that I don't understand her or him is there, my religion says, "*There, although you do not understand her or him, is also a child of God. Get busy. Know who your brother is, know who your sister is, and learn to love them.*"

Holy Trinity - we've all seen the diagram. It's sort of a triangle. God the Creator is in the middle and Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is the Father, God is the Son, and God is the Holy Spirit. But the Holy Spirit is not the Father and the Father is not the Son...Yikes! Do you believe you are created by God? Do you believe you are loved by God? Are you therefore energized, supported and confident enough to love others - and not see yourself in warfare with those who are different and even with those who believe differently from you? You are invited to fall in love with them, and the big risk in that, friends, is this: It might change you more than it will change them!

It's time for us to get off the old seesaw of having to be right about everything. I think we'd make progress if we got off the seesaw of having to be right about *anything*. How about if we could just be? Believe that we are a part of creation and so is everyone else and that God loves what God creates. Is that enough religion for today? Will that be enough for you to work on this week? Do you need the philosophy, the theology, the Trinity, the complexity? I'm not opposed to complexity. I think it's fine, but when it prevents you and me from loving those who are different, when it prevents you and me from loving each other, when it prevents you and me from falling in love with the rest of God's creation, something is wrong with it and I don't care what you call it, even if you call it religion.

And so it is I recall for you what happened last week at the 8 o'clock mass in this room, and this is important. We had first communions so there were 36 people at the 8 o'clock. They got up that early. I did too. *[laughter]* Four kids. The Pettinato family had Jewish friends who I've known from parties and social events before, and they came. The first question of me when they came in the door was, "*Where's the Jewish section?*" *[laughter]* Well, it might be on the altar. How about that? Did you forget that this body and blood is Jewish body and blood? Circumcised Jewish two thousand years old body and blood - Jewish, Jewish, Jewish, Jewish Jesus. His mother was not an Italian Catholic. *[laughter]* Do you get it?

So what do you do at the time of the distribution of the sacrament? You know all the horror stories, don't you? You have been excluded. You have been told "No." As far as I'm concerned, whoever comes, it's their choice to receive or not to receive. I had this "Aha" moment of thinking, "*What if Jesus were here for these first communions today and he came to the altar?*" Orthodoxy would prevent him from receiving the very gift that he gave to us - the sacrament. That's nuts! That's sick. It's divisive. And if you ask me, it's wrong.

So is it OK on this day of celebrating a theological idea if we make religion simple, make it about God's love for us and God's promise to encourage and help us and empower us to love each other? Is that enough? Well then, that's the end of the sermon, Vito!

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