

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller
Trinity Sunday
31 May 2015

Scripture readings:

Isaiah 6:1-8

Romans 8:12-17

John 3:1-17

This is Trinity Sunday, the only day in the life of the Church which is dedicated to a theological idea, the theology of the Holy Trinity. Too bad Carole McCollum's not here. You know my simple distillation of the Holy Trinity, don't you? Two men and a bird. [*Laughter*] She liked that one.

We take time today to think about this idea which can be extraordinarily confusing and certainly in the two thousand-year life of the Church has been extremely divisive. You may know that one of the major differences between the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Latin Church, the western Church, the Church we are a part of or at least descended from, is that they make a very big deal about two words in the Apostles' Creed. Interestingly enough, in Latin those two words become one word because the enclitic, the word "and" in Latin which is *que* is allowed to be added on to the word it connects with. Of course in English it takes us three words to translate the two words that become one word in Latin. Do you want to know what those words are? The one word is *filioque* and the argument about the *filioque* clause is the argument which says, "and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father **and the Son.**" That's what *filioque* means in Latin: "and the Son."

In 1052 - now that was before most of us were born - the Church decided it could not stay unified because they couldn't agree on whether or not the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father or from the Father and the Son. It's known as the *Photian Schism*. It perdures until today. "*Oh how these Christians love one another!*" [*Laughter*]

And so we gather this Sunday, always the Sunday after Pentecost, which probably has something to do with last week and thinking a little bit about the Holy Spirit, the bird part, to consider the whole shooting match. You may remember my colleague and friend, John Wilson, from Bristol. The cathedral in Bristol in England, where I've sometimes preached in the past, is known as the Cathedral of the Holy and Undivided Trinity. That nomenclature in England is ancient. It goes way back to the Norman Invasion in 1066. We're hanging out in the 11th century today, aren't we?

The need for Christians to make sure that they're not confused with other people who believe, such as Jews, and then a little later, such as Moslems. You know both Jews and Moslems look at us when we say we're monotheists and they have every right, if you ask me, to laugh up their sleeves. You've got one God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Monotheism is one God, and that's what leads us into all of this theological quagmire about the Holy Trinity. First of all, Trinity is not a world you'll find in scripture relative to God. Trinity is developed when the early Church works on its understanding of who God is, particularly in relationship to Jesus, and who Jesus is.

I hope you were aware or felt what I felt when I was reading the Gospel that there's stuff in here - of course you know when you deal with the gospel of St. John, you're dealing with material that's written a good fifty years after Jesus was dead and disappeared - these arguments about the Church and who Jesus is in relationship to the Church, these arguments looking back to pre-Christian scriptures: "*Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*" All of these attempts to connect new ideas about God with the old established ideas about God; all of these attempts to argue Jesus as the appropriate conclusion of all of the prophecies so that the prophecies might be fulfilled, *etcetera, etcetera*. The early Church works very hard at understanding and developing understandings about who God is.

I want to show you what a nasty turn that can take. Will you open your prayer books to page 864 in the back, please? Back to our Latin lesson: *Quicumque Vult*. Do you know what that means? Well, the secret with Latin in Church is: take the first couple words in English and that usually gives you the title. "*Whoever wants*" is what *Quicumque Vult* means. Just let me share with you - this is one of the great Ecumenical Creeds - this lovely idea about how the Church

worked at its understanding of who God is:

Whoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholic Faith. Which Faith except everyone do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.

In other words, if you don't swallow everything in this document, you are going to hell. Do you want to read on? It won't make your day.

And the Catholic Faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one, the Glory equal, the Majesty co-eternal. Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Ghost...

You get it? *[Laughter]* The point is: people worked really, really hard and seriously at trying to get these ideas nailed down so that they knew who believed what *they* believed. And apparently for a long time in the life and history of the Church we have run into problems with each other, other Christians, about what it is we believe, think, preach, teach, and feel about God.

I suppose that has its place. We, after all, are intelligent beings who were created by God with brains to think. But the one thing I believe is that God did not give us all the same brain. We are happy to admit that every snowflake is different. Is it hard to believe that God created every brain different, with the ability to think, imagine, and reason differently from someone else? And then the Church says if you don't have one brain you're going to hell in a handcart and we'll send you there happily and we'll help you get there! *[Laughter]*

Well, I think maybe the time has come in the life of the Church for us not to worry so much about how we think about God but to take a break and think about how God might think about us. And that's not really as hard a thing to do as you might imagine because we get clues in the Church and in the tradition very early on, back to the first pages of scripture. In the beginning God is the Creator. God makes the whole shooting match, everybody in the shooting match, and God loves the shooting match and everybody in it and tells us that one of the reasons that God loves us is because God made us like God's self. *"In the image and likeness of God He made them, male and female."*

What do you suppose Freud would say about the ego of the Almighty? Well, it happens to all of us every time a human being is born, he or she comes into this world with the DNA of his or her parents. And so we believe, teach and confess, long before we ever get to this stuff about the Trinity, that every human being in the world is a creature of the Almighty, contains divine DNA, if you will, and is adored by the God who creates her or him and is given to the world as a bearer of God's own image. Maybe that's a better place for us to start when we think about the Trinity, with ideas about how God sees us and everybody else in the world rather than how we can unify our vision of how we see God. We need, I think, to spend time thinking about how God thinks about us, and then if we allow those ideas to permeate and percolate through us, we will think about each other and how we believe together differently.

I had my prejudices deeply challenged this morning when I flipped through the channels and I recognized the interior of a church in New York, believe it or not, by the paint on the wall and a little bit of the architecture. I'm good! *[Laughter]* It was Marble Collegiate Church and I was right. It was not Norman Vincent Peale but Deepak Chopra in a Christian church. What is going on? *[Laughter]* That's just not done by Lutherans. And there he was with these marvelous ideas. Of course I didn't have time to listen to all of it. I wouldn't want to be late for church. *[Laughter]* But talking about the physiology of deep contemplation and centering thought. There are studies done, physiological studies on people who meditate and how their bodies change and their DNA even changes, and the ends of DNA that fray and make you old stay better intact. Any wonder I'm getting old! I don't do enough of that stuff or any at all. But to imagine that the kind of stuff that draws us together as a Christian community and family and people who know and love God as we know and love each other, I found extraordinarily refreshing, and I was pleased to have my prejudices about who can speak in a Christian church, even me at my age, challenged. It was beautiful. Just that part was beautiful.

And so here we are on this day of theological precision with these extraordinary documents in front of us, such as the *Quicunque Vult*. How's that for a start - if you want to be saved, you must agree with us. That's exactly what this is.

If you want to be saved, you must agree with this. And we are the saved, and if you don't agree with us, you are the damned. Well, that has to do with how we see each other, but I don't think it's what we are invited in scripture to believe about how God sees us. There is hope in the scriptures today when we read that 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...and there I choked, because I thought this is the early Church saying what the later Church said - if you agree with us about Jesus, you're saved. You know what, friends, I'm not sure Jesus would have said that about himself. The older I get, the surer I am of that. But I do believe that what Jesus said and represented is salvific, is hope for us and for all people because he was willing to see other people the way God saw them, not the way other people saw them. So Jesus' vision of others was one that transcended culture, language, age, gender, politics, society and social order. It was a different view of others, so that when he turned in to Marble Collegiate Church, Jesus was at the t.v. in the kitchen. I was in the other room at the other t.v. He saw Deepak Chopra and didn't think, "*Oh, he's not really a Christian. What's he doing in a Christian church?*" He saw Deepak Chopra and said, "*Oh, there's one of God's beloved children working hard at trying to understand God's love for him and for the world.*" That was Jesus in the kitchen responding to the same thing that I was, but differently. It was the business of how God sees others rather than how I see them.

You remember last week we talked about the great Pentecost experience of how everybody understood in his or her own language what was being said. Well, I think it's important for us to review that a little bit because I firmly believe and came to know that in my work in parishes where there were multiples of cultures and languages, I know for a fact in my personal experience, and I'm sure you do too, that when you walk into a room and somebody really cares about you, whether or not they speak your language, you will pick up on that. And if they *don't* like you, you will know that as well. We call it body language; we call it eye contact. There are also scientific studies that animals communicate with facials. One of the earliest and most universal facial communications is disdain. We are also told not to look a bear in the eye because you engage and then you become prey. Not a word has to be spoken. I'm under the suspicion that human beings are at the top of the created order or close to it, and we have all of these animalistic, naturalistic, humanistic abilities to communicate long before we open our mouths and utter a word at all. That's God's view of how we respect, treat and relate to each other, not our view. Our view says, "*You must speak my language, you must eat my kind of food, you must trade in my money, you must respect my orders, you must...you must... You must fight my enemies and you will fight my enemies with your money, you must...you must...*"

And Jesus says, "*You don't have to do a thing. God loves you fully, completely, unconditionally, undeservedly, and God's view of you is God's view of everybody else in the world - everybody!*"

Now for people who want to make religious organizations, that's not going to fly because you're not going to know who's a member. You won't know who to send a pledge card to. You won't know what language to worship in. You won't know which kind of liturgy to use. You won't know what to wear to church. I used to have bad dreams as a kid that I was in church without a tie on. Maybe that's why I wear a collar now. I don't have to worry about the tie.
[Laughter]

As we take time today to consider the Holy Trinity, I implore you to allow the Church's willingness to say that as we have come to know Jesus in the life of the early Church and as the ideas of Jesus and about Jesus have perdured among us for two thousand years, that we can be willing to say, "*Yes, we are monotheists but our image of God is complex; at the same time it is simple. It is universal at the same time that it is profoundly personal. But that it waivers not one iota and differs in nothing in that it is completely, fully, thoroughly and extraordinarily, exquisitely loving without condition and that that is what identifies us as Christians because we get our idea of God from Jesus whose idea of other people comes from God which is way larger than coming from any individual human being because God is afraid of no one.*" God creates difference. God gives us different languages, different genders, different colors, different ages, all the differences of our lives so that we have a modicum of exchange, so that we can learn from each other and share and give and receive. It's really hard to do that with Mexicans when you build a wall between Texas and Mexico. It's hard to do that when we build walls in our community of faith, when we say, "*No, this really isn't the church for you because you are... This is not a place where you can find God's love because we don't love your kind.*"

And so I believe the doctrine of the Holy Trinity *can*, in fact, be a very useful tool for us even today as long as we use it as one of inclusion rather than exclusion, as long as we use it as a doctrine of love rather than hatred, as long as we use it as a doctrine to open our own eyes, minds, hearts, arms and hands in service to others so that God's love can be known by those who don't speak our language, who don't look like us, who don't use our money, who don't eat our food

and who don't dress like us. For no other reason, not because they deserve it, because God knows *you* don't. But it's because God has given this to us and it's not ours to keep; it's ours to share. And so we join the pope and the rest of the Protestant world when we remember that we confess a God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

I saw a Catholic priest on t.v. this morning who was worth listening to. He talked about God really loving God's self in creation, and he talked about God creating Jesus His Son and they look at each other and fall in love. What's the communication of love? They just sigh at each other. And of course the sigh becomes the bird, the Holy Spirit! Beautiful images!