

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
Trinity Sunday
27 May 2018

Scripture readings:

Isaiah 6:1-8 Romans 8:12-17 John 3:1-17

This is the only day of the Church year devoted to a theological idea, and that idea of the Holy Trinity is a complex one. It is so complex that we end up with bad English in the Collect for today. Did you get it? The last sentence of the Collect: "*O Father; who with the Son and the Holy Spirit live and reign...*" I think Father is singular, isn't it? It should be "*lives and reigns.*"

I'm glad of that kind of error because it just points to the confusion that we inherit as Christians when we are given this doctrine to consider which becomes a part of our tradition and faith early on, but it's not there from the beginning. The word "Trinity" does not appear in scripture. One of the early records of the word's use is in the third century, in the year 225, by your friend and mine, Tertullian. I know you sit up at night reading Tertullian. *[laughter]* Me either! But for those who follow those things, that's where we get the first glimpse of this word.

And then later on in our liturgy we will come to Carole McCallum's favorite part - the use of the Nicene Creed. *[laughter]* You think this is bad, Carole. Take your Books of Common Prayer for a moment and open them to page 864, and there you will encounter the text of the Athanasian Creed. When you get a chance, read that text because it will answer every question you have about why churches are dying. *[laughter]* There is absolutely nothing in here that is welcoming to anyone who thinks differently from the framers of this creed, and if you don't agree with what they say - I can give it to you in a nutshell - you're going to hell! *[laughter]*

So the Church in England had 19 occasions when the Athanasian Creed could be used throughout the year. It eventually sorted out to once a year which would have been on Trinity Sunday at matins. You're getting a real deal today! We're going to do the Nicene Creed. Carole's a Methodist pastor and can't stand the Nicene Creed - not because she disagrees with it but because it takes too much time. *[laughter]*

Well, today is our day to take time to think about the Trinity. Do you have Jewish friends or Muslim friends? When you have your next discussion with them and you decide to talk with them about being a monotheist, carry your portfolio of Trinitarian doctrine along with you and try and convince a Muslim or a Jew that you are monotheist. To those folks we look like people with three gods.

As I said earlier, the Trinity hasn't been with us from the very beginning - from very early on, yes - but not from the beginning. The Trinity that we end up with today in the 21st century, I think is indicative of the struggle that people have had in their attempts to understand who God is and what she is like. You see what happens through the cultures and traditions and religions that have influenced us. We end up with a description of God which looks like two men and a bird. *[laughter]*

And they are gray men, not black and white men. And then we wonder why religion faces such a difficult time when we insist that people subscribe to ideas of God which may have been come by honestly but which certainly need to continue to grow as much as they did way back then.

In the creed today we will come upon three words when talking about the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father. In the sixth century somebody added a phrase which in English translates as "*and the Son.*" In Latin it is *filioque*. So the creed speaks of the Holy Spirit "*who proceeds from the Father and the Son.*" To this day the churches in the Eastern Orthodox Church will not say those three additional words. People have fought about them and killed each other over those ideas about God.

I don't think these things are unimportant, but I think they can be given way too much importance for the value of religion to us in our day and in our society. I think they're treasures we receive and appropriate, but I think they're things about which we need to think and be ourselves faithful. The whole deal of how the church comes to view Jesus as a part of the godhead I find interesting because we see early on the Church coming to an understanding that the messenger *is* the message. You remember the words from the beginning of St. John's gospel: "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and the Word dwelt among us.*" So early on in the life of the Church, Jesus is understood to be himself, in fact, *the message*,

not just the messenger. I'm OK with that from time to time, but I'm not OK with it when the message becomes about whether or not Jesus is God rather than the message itself which is about God's love and desire to be in and with God's own creation.

In one of our lessons today we encountered the business of calling God "*Abba*" - essentially Daddy, Pop, Father - a wickedly radical concept about the Almighty from people who lived in fear and had to kill the right kinds of animals to make an angry God pleased with them.

So this is a great opportunity for us in the Church to think again about our theology - who it is we understand Jesus to be. And if you don't think that's complex, when we get to that boring creed you will see that when we talk about God the Creator, one sentence is enough. The big fat paragraph in the middle is all about Jesus and the contortions we have to go through to make Jesus into God - which means we create what are called birth narratives about Mary having a baby without having sex. Can you imagine that? And then how relevant is that to us? And then we get caught up in that, and then we have to have Mary's mother having Mary having not had sex. How unrelated is that to anything that we know as human beings? I hate to tell you this, but there's not a soul in this room who got here without your parents having had sex, as unimaginable as that may be to you.

But if we are going to have a God who is our Daddy, our Papa, our accessible, loving Creator, we need to be able to believe that we are understood in our full humanity by a fully human God - and that's where Jesus becomes important to me - who understands who and what it is we are as human beings. That's why it's important for me to keep Mary not so much a virgin, but an example of the ability of a human being to encounter God and honestly and faithfully say *yes* to God, even though it seems ridiculous to do so.

Now I did get up at 5:20 this morning. I did see the pope. I usually do on Sunday. But I encountered the most astonishing thing on the religious channel this morning that outraged me beyond comparison, about which I must speak with you for a moment. There was for \$39.95 a wonderful and extraordinary rosary for sale. I don't have a problem with rosaries or any technique that one wants to use to say one's prayers, but let me tell you about this rosary. As you know, a rosary is a chain of beads at the end of which is a cross. The cross on this rosary - on which was superimposed the corpus, the body of Jesus - the cross was composed of (Are you ready for this?) the stars and stripes. On the reverse of the cross where these words: "*One nation under God.*" I kid you not. In the middle of the rosary is usually a medal of Mary. There is on this rosary also an image of the Blessed Mother imposed over a map of the United States of America. Every bead on that rosary contains two letters. The two letters are different on every bead. They're the two-letter abbreviations of every state in the United States of America.

Well, pastor, what's the problem with that? We have a lot to be proud of as Americans in that we are in a country which not only allows - but should encourage - free expression of religion and those differences. And that's a result of the State Church in England in the 18th century, etc., etc., etc. You know the history better than I. On a national holiday such as this, I guess they aimed that to today's audience. I don't know. We're invited to believe that our religion has something to do with nationalism...national superiority, that we are a Christian nation - and we are not, and I thank God that we are not - that there is a special protection, that God should be badgered for on behalf of our country and not for the rest of the world. I've said it before and you know my feelings about the bumper sticker, "God Bless America." In my view it is only half of a bumper sticker. The other half is "God Damn the Rest of the World." If we can pray for this country, we should be praying for our enemies and for those who do us harm and for those we do not understand, as well as for ourselves. If our Christianity becomes narrow and blinkered and channeled like that, we are of all people to be most pitied - and probably are no longer Christians.

I do not believe that Jesus was sent by God to die for my sins. Jesus, I believe, had a view about God which was inclusive and radical and beautiful and personal. And he attempted to share that. And he drove the religious establishment and the political establishment and the social establishment wild with rage because his understanding of God did not match theirs and didn't exclude anybody - foreigners, poor people, disabled people, women, people of color, young people. And that was so unacceptable to those in power in his day that the only response they had to that was to assassinate him. That wasn't God doing that. Don't blame God for human ignorance, hatred, and prejudice. Don't, because it's not a part of our Trinitarian theology. Our Trinitarian theology proclaims a God who is Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier of the world.. And there was no United States of America two thousand years ago.

This is how crazy this stuff gets. Let me give you an example - just a week ago - from my own life. I was

having a discussion with a family member about Jesus in the temple overturning the tables of the money changers, and the response to me was, “*Well, Jesus was mad, and he was probably mad because there were Muslims there.*” [laughter] Get it? There was no such thing as a Muslim until the 6th century. And the temple was gone by 70 AD. But do you see how that kind of ignorant hate-speech focused at harming others is completely unrelated to the gospel message and our confession of a triune God.

Now one other little piece about the Trinity and its use in naming churches. You know our friend the Canon, who comes from England, is from Bristol. The cathedral in Bristol is “The Cathedral of the One Holy and Undivided Trinity.” It is felt that a lot of churches and cathedrals were named Trinity at the time of the Reformation and in response to the cult of the saints when it was believed that the cult of the saints and the Marian cult were too much cluttered with other stuff, and so it was time to resurrect in the consciousness of the people the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. So where you see a church named Trinity, you might look in the history and find a Protestant strain going on there.

So I’m pleased to celebrate this festival with you. I’m also pleased that we only have to do it once a year. But if you understand the Trinity, please explain it to me. You’re way ahead of me in that category. I think God needs to remain way larger than our understanding and ability to fit into our own little heads. I do think that God is not just one cranky old man, a Jew two thousand years ago, and a bird. That’s why we gather today to allow that Spirit to come among us and use us to re-constitute and to incarnate the Body of Christ here and now in this world today. That’s our business and that’s our theological program as Christians right here right now.

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