

The Trinity- Mystery Beyond Knowledge Isaiah 6: 1-8; John 3: 1-17

Today is Trinity Sunday- which is always the first Sunday following Pentecost in the liturgical year. Trinity Sunday is a special/unusual Sunday in that it is the only Sunday when we focus on or celebrate a doctrine rather than learning from Jesus' teachings and letters written to the early church. It is a time when we focus on a God who has come to us as Creator, Christ and the Holy Spirit. It is a time when preachers find it difficult to bring a different message than that which attempts to fully explain in a new and understandable way what/who the Trinity is. How God comes to us in the presence of the Creative Father, or the incarnate Son, or the powerful Holy Spirit- well that's a mystery beyond our knowledge to comprehend. Numerous attempts have been made to describe the Trinity- I am sure you have heard many:

*God is like the parts of an apple- skin, flesh and seeds- three parts, yet one apple. *God is like the petals of a clover leaf- three parts, yet one leaf.

*God is like water- liquid, ice and steam. While possible helpful imagery, all feel totally inadequate to capture the fulness of God and God's presence in our lives.

This week I read another attempt to describe the Trinity- A pastor was looking for a good illustration with which he could help his Confirmation students understand the Trinity. He thought he found it in the image of an egg, which is one egg- yet comprised of a shell, the white and the yolk. When he cracked the egg in front of the class to demonstrate the three-in-one, out came a double yolk!! OOPS!

The Scriptures for today help us understand a little who our Holy Creator God is:

1. God is the one who created us and loved us so much that Christ, the Son was given to us- John 3: 16
2. God is a spirit and we must be born of the spirit- John 3: 5
3. God has a mission and ministry for us as part of God's created and adopted people- Isaiah 6: 8

We have been created and adopted by a loving God, we have been given Jesus to atone for our sins and a Spirit presence that continues in our lives.

In our Gospel reading from John 3: we find the account of Nicodemus coming to Jesus. The account clearly states he came by night. One has to wonder why such an issue is made of it being at night. He was a well-known Pharisee- a leader of the Jews- he obviously felt drawn to Jesus' message, but he may have been reluctant to identify himself openly with Christ. Or the recording of the visit being in the night, may have been John's way of suggesting that Nicodemus was literally "in the dark" when it came to his understanding of who Jesus really

was. The man, Nicodemus appears only in John's gospel and always in a somewhat secretive and hesitant role. Here in John 3, he comes to Jesus by night. In chapter 7, he makes a tentative move to defend Jesus. In chapter 19, he is linked to Joseph of Arimathea, as together they quietly bury Jesus following his crucifixion.

Nicodemus approaches Jesus acknowledging that Jesus is a teacher come from God because no one could do the signs Jesus was doing without the presence of God. Jesus tells him no one can see the kingdom of God without being "born from above." Jesus talks to him about "birth" and poor Nicodemus can only think of ordinary human birth. Jesus talks to him about "being born of the spirit" and likens the spirit to the "wind" that blows where it chooses and we do not know where it comes from or where it goes. All through this conversation we hear Nicodemus- getting confused- "How can this be?" In his literal way of thinking, it didn't make sense. Nicodemus likely arrived to the conversation with Jesus fairly confident that he had a good grasp of who Jesus was, but he left having been encountered by the mysterious, majestic God in the flesh. I believe we can easily understand what Nicodemus might have felt as he attempted to literally comprehend what Jesus was saying. We also feebly attempt to understand a mystery which is beyond knowledge. So maybe the point of OUR encounters with Christ, is not so much to know and understand the facts but to be open through faith, to gratefully accept the reality of our- beyond comprehension- God- Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit- the Trinity.

The word, "trinity" does not appear in Scriptures even though we do find the individuals- God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit found. In fact, it is unclear how the doctrine was understood at the time of the disciples. The oldest writing which attempted to formulate the church's belief in the Trinity has been used since the second century and is part of what we now know as the Apostles Creed.

We always include a statement of faith in each worship service. Often that statement is the familiar The Apostles Creed. I am going to use it a bit differently this morning. Rather than read it following this message as is usually done, we will take each Article separately NOW- read it together- with a few comments to follow. The comments or meanings stated are portions found in Luther's Catechism. Please note- each of the articles addresses one of the three persons of the Trinity- God as our Creator/Parent, Jesus as our Savior, and the Holy Spirit our ever-present support.

First Article: (read with me) I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.

What does this mean? We believe that God has made us and all creatures; that God has given us all that we have including our body and soul as well as richly and daily providing all that we need to support this body and life. God defends and protects us. Our Creator God does all

this, not because we deserve or are worthy of it but only out of divine goodness and mercy. For all this, it is our duty to thank and praise, serve and obey God.

Second Article: (read with me) And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended into hell. The third day He rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty. From thence He will come to judge the living and the dead.

What does this mean? We believe that Jesus Christ is true God, present from all eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary. Jesus has redeemed us- lost and condemned people- purchased and won us from all sins, from death, and from the power of the evil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death. This was so we may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, live and reigns to all eternity.

Third Article: (read with me) I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.

What does this mean? We believe that we are not capable, by our own reason or strength, to truly believe or come to God; but the Holy Spirit calls us, enlightens us, sanctifies us and keeps us in the true faith. In the same way the whole Christian church on earth is called, gathered, enlightened, sanctified and sustained in the one true faith. In this Christian church, all our sins and the sins of all believers are daily and richly forgiven. On the Last Day, we and all believers in God will be raised and given eternal life.

As we consider the awesomeness of God- the one who created us, the one who saved us from eternal damnation, and the one who is present daily to sustain us- it is appropriate to consider our response. For that we can turn to our Old Testament reading from Isaiah 6. Isaiah records a vision whereby he encounters God and receives two gifts of grace- a word of forgiveness and a call to service.

The vision of Isaiah records a specific call to service- one of the few in Scripture. Remember how God called Samuel when he was a child living with Eli in the Temple. Samuel is awakened during the night by a voice calling his name. He assumes it is Eli and goes to ask what is needed. On the third time of hearing his voice and going to Eli- Eli recognizes that the voice must be that of God calling young Samuel and instructs him to respond simply, "Here I am...speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

Another specific call to service can be noted when Peter and his brother Andrew were at their job- fishing. Jesus appears and calls them to come with him to “fish for people.” They drop everything, leave their father, and began their ministry as Jesus’ disciples. They were ultimately significant in the early church.

Now the vision of Isaiah finds him in God’s presence. God sitting on a throne...the hem of God’s robe filled the temple. Seraphs/angels were in attendance, saying, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” There was an earthquake, the house filled with smoke. Isaiah is amazed and said, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people with unclean lips; YET my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts!” One of the angels took a live coal from the altar and touched Isaiah’s mouth while stating, “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” At that point, Isaiah heard the voice of the Lord asking, “Whom shall I send and who will go for us?” Isaiah responds, “Here I am; send me!”

In each instance- with Samuel, Peter and Isaiah- they received a specific call and responded without asking -what, where, why, when.

We say we serve this awesome God of the Trinity- this God we try to understand and put into human words. One thing is clear, the Trinity is a mystery that is beyond all possibility of knowledge. But think- in reality, if we could in some way understand every part of it, it would have to be brought down to a human level filled with a myriad of human limitations. God- Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit- could then no longer be the awesome God we serve. We can set aside worry and anxiousness to rest in the assurance that our God created us, loved us enough to send Christ to suffer and die in our place, and then leaves the Holy Spirit to constantly hold us close. How all of that wonderfulness happens is a mystery beyond our understanding, but that is OK. Instead, we acknowledge this mystery with open and grateful hearts and hands and ask with those saints of old, “Here I am....what do you want me to do?” The next thing to do is step back and listen for God’s quiet voice coming with an answer. Then with a grateful heart do what you hear God calling you to do- no what, where, why and when questions allowed.

Karen Houtman 5/30/2021