

Trinity Sunday
June 7, 2009

St. Margaret's
Annapolis

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

If you're particularly alert this morning, you've noticed that, instead of the words from Psalm 19 with which I usually preface my sermon, I have begun with the Trinitarian formula -- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Yahweh, Jesuha, Rhuah. It is, after all, Trinity Sunday.

Trinity Sunday, always the Sunday after Pentecost, is the only feast day in the church calendar that is about a doctrine and not an historical event. Such is the importance of this doctrine of One God in Three Persons. But it is not an easy subject. It is nothing less than how we try to talk about the very nature of God; of who God is and *how* God is.

We Christians tend to not think too hard about the meaning and implications of the Trinity. We take for granted that we are monotheists, and yet we speak freely about the three persons of God: about God (Creator, Father, Yahweh), about Jesus (Redeemer, Savior, Messiah), and about the Holy Spirit (Advocate, Comforter, Sanctifier) -- all of which is quite confusing to non-Christians. How can we claim to be monotheists -- that is, believe in only one God -- and talk about this Trinity?

This business of the Trinity was the main subject of the early church councils, and resulted in the Nicene Creed, which we say at every Sunday Eucharist. If you're interested in some of the other historical documents and statements about the Trinity, I suggest you peruse those parts of the Prayer Book toward the back, beginning around page 863. There you'll find the Creed of Athanasius and the Thirty-nine Articles, for example; guaranteed to either add to your confusion or put you to sleep!

In order to help with this dilemma -- this problem of talking about the Trinity -- people have come up with all kinds of analogies or illustrations. My personal favorite is Neapolitan ice cream: strawberry, vanilla, and chocolate. All ice cream (same substance), different flavors (separate persons). Not very sophisticated, perhaps, but memorable.

Then there's the apple: the core of the apple, the meat of the apple, and the skin or peel of the apple. One apple, three parts. Maybe the best of these illustrations is "h₂o": ice, water, and steam. All h₂o in its different manifestations.

Let me suggest one more. It comes from my love of the so-called Serenity Prayer. "*God, grant me serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage*

to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference." Although it's associated with Alcoholics Anonymous, those are the opening lines of a longer prayer written by Reinhold Niebuhr in 1926, and which he describes as having ancient roots.

In all its forms, this beloved prayer always contains three key elements: serenity, courage, and wisdom. It has a nice, Trinitarian ring to it – and I submit that it is a wonderful way to describe the various ways that God comes to us, offering us these same elements: serenity, courage, and wisdom.

When I think of God as serenity, I think of the beach... of the rhythm of the surf, of the multitude of the stars, of primal nature; things so vast and cosmic that they are beyond my comprehension. When I think of serenity, I think of that "still small voice" of God that we might -- just might hear when we stop trying so hard. And I think of being held in the lap of God -- the loving mother/father God -- who when we allow it, holds us close so that we can hear God's own heartbeat, like the rhythm of the surf.

And then there is courage: the courage of God in Christ Jesus. Did you know that the word "courage" comes from the root word *cor*, which means heart? So to have courage is to have heart. And what a wonderful way to think of Jesus -- as the heart of God, come to encourage us, to fill us with courage and hope!

And finally, wisdom; one of the most ancient ways to talk about God's Spirit. In the Old Testament this wisdom is called *Sophia*, which literally means wisdom. The early church called it *hagia Sophia*, God's holy wisdom, and it is the greatest gift of the Holy Spirit.

Of course, if we labor too much over this business of doctrine, we might end up being blinded by the means so that we cannot perceive the end. And when things get too abstract, it's time to turn to story, like the famed Tolstoy tale of the bishop sailing back to his monastery after a long journey.

During the voyage, the bishop overheard the sailors telling of three hermits who lived on a remote island that they would be passing. The bishop prevailed upon the captain to interrupt their journey so that he could meet these godly men.

The hermits were very old and lived very simple lives. When the bishop was rowed over to their little island and stepped ashore, the hermits bowed to him. The bishop gave them a blessing and said, "I have heard that you godly men live here saving your own souls and praying to God for all people. I, an unworthy servant of Christ, have come to see you and to do what I can to teach you, if you like."

The hermits were thrilled. "Tell me," said the bishop, "how do you serve God?" They answered, "We do not know how to serve God, we only serve and support each other."

"But how do you pray?" asked the bishop. To which they replied, "We pray this way: 'Three are you, O God, and three are we. Have mercy on us.'" And they all looked up to heaven and prayed together: "Three are you, O God, and three are we. Have mercy on us!"

The bishop smiled and said it was clear that they had heard of the Trinity, but explained to them that they were not praying correctly. So he spent the whole day teaching them the Lord's Prayer. He had to work very hard, as they were old and not learned. One could not hear very well, and another mumbled badly. But after much, much work, they could finally repeat the prayer by themselves.

The bishop blessed them once again, at which the hermits bowed low and kissed him, he returned to the ship. Once there, he offered a prayer of thanksgiving that God had used him to teach these hermits something about the true faith.

As the ship sailed away, the bishop sat in the moonlight gazing toward the island they had just left. When they were a long way off, he saw what he thought was a reflection on the water, but it was gaining on them very fast. It was too large to be a sea gull and it was moving too fast to be another ship.

As the reflection got closer, he realized it was the three hermits. They were running across the water as if it were dry land, hand in hand, gray beards shining. The helmsman and all those on board were stunned and speechless. When the three hermits approached the ship, they cried out in one voice, "We have forgotten your teaching, servant of God. We can remember nothing of it. Teach us again."

The bishop crossed himself and said, "Your own prayer will reach the Lord. It is not for me to teach you. Pray for me, a sinner." The bishop bowed low and the old hermits turned back toward their little island, where they served each other and prayed their simple prayer.

So, let us celebrate the Doctrine of the Trinity. Let us be glad for the teachings of the Church. But let us always remember that they are a means to an end and not the end itself -- which is always and only God. It is our holiness of life that matters, which is our love and support for each other. And that is all that really matters.

In the name of God: Yahweh, Jesuha, and Rhuah.

In the name of God: Serenity, Courage, and Wisdom.

In the name of God: Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifying Spirit.

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Lori M. Lowe+