

Trinity Sunday - Year A
18 May 2008
Saint Anne's Episcopal Church
Lee's Summit, Missouri

Matthew 28:16-20

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful people and kindle in them the fire of your love. AMEN.

Today is Trinity Sunday. It is one of the seven principal feasts of the church, and it is the only day of the church year that calls us to celebrate a teaching of the church. The teaching that there is one God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The scriptural readings for today reflect this “three-in-one” understanding of God – Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. They provide the biblical backdrop, if you will, for this non-scriptural word “trinity.” A word that appears nowhere in scripture but was actually devised by Tertullian, an early Christian leader who lived in the second century, to express the mystery of the unity-in-diversity of God. From the Latin, *tri* meaning three and *unitas* meaning unity.

This mystery of God, revealed in three ways, is a core belief of Christianity. And, I don't know about you, but it's a teaching that I struggle to understand myself, much less to explain to others. Maybe you have that struggle, too.

Theologians through the ages have also struggled with this teaching – one God in three persons – and in their struggles some have been labeled heretics. We could name a number of attempts to talk about the trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - that have gotten people into theological “hot water.”

And, preachers often joke about trying to avoid preaching on Trinity Sunday, if there's any way around it. Maybe find a seminarian and invite them to preach. Hmmmm, as a recent seminarian, I was invited by rectors to preach the last two Trinity Sundays. Or, maybe if you can't find a handy seminarian, you just conveniently take vacation that day

Well, there isn't a seminarian handy; and I clearly haven't timed my vacation right. So, here I am preaching again on Trinity Sunday. Must be a rookie mistake.

Now if you think I'm going to explain the Trinity this morning in my few minutes of sermon time, I'm afraid you are going to be sorely disappointed; because that is not what I'm going to do.

Maybe that's the theological coward's way out. I hope not.

But, I do think that we can learn something about the Trinity and what this teaching of the church about unity in diversity can mean to us today as a faith community by considering these very well-known words of Jesus, recorded in Matthew's Gospel that we've heard this morning.

In today's Gospel reading, we find Jesus' disciples – the eleven, absent Judas Iscariot, on a mountain in Galilee. While we don't know the exact geographical location of this mountain, we do know the theological significance of the mountain. For a mountain is exactly where Jesus has been many times in Mathew's Gospel.

The mountain where he delivered his great sermon that began with the beatitudes, "Blessed are the poor in spirit..."

The mountain where Matthew tells us Jesus went alone to pray.

The mountain where Jesus healed the lame, the blind, and the mute. Where he had compassion on the multitude that had come to him and fed them with seven loaves of bread and a few small fish.

The mountain where Jesus took Peter and James and John. On the mountain they saw his transfigured glory and heard a voice from heaven say, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased; listen to him.”

And, now the disciples have met Jesus on a mountain where Jesus will speak new truth to them.

Here Jesus commissions the disciples, with these familiar words that we call “the Great Commission.”

Go...and make disciples...baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

This commissioning on the mountain began where I think all commissions from God begin. You see before God can give us a commission I think we first have to recognize that we have encountered the holy – we have come face-to-face with a God who is radically, completely, and utterly “other.”

For Moses, that encounter came in a blazing bush as he tended his father-in-law’s flock. For Isaiah, it came in a spectacular vision in the temple in Jerusalem. For the eleven disciples, it came on that mountain as they encountered the risen Jesus.

Whenever we have that encounter with the holy, we recognize that we are being confronted by a majestic strangeness that can only inspire awe and wonder and worship – just as Moses

worshipped in front of the bush on Mount Horeb, just as Isaiah worshipped in the temple, just as those disciples worshipped on that mountain.

But, after the initial response of worship when encountering the holy, the disciples and the prophets before them had doubts.

For Moses, it was the belief that he just wasn't talented enough to be God's representative. God, the Israelites will never believe me when I tell them that God has sent me to deliver them. And, me? Me speak to the mighty Pharaoh? God, you know I've never been a smooth talker.

For Isaiah, it was the knowledge that compared to God, he just didn't measure up. God, I am totally unworthy in your presence; my unclean lips are not fit for speaking words that will come from you.

For those eleven disciples on that mountain, I think it may have been doubt in their own ability to obey and follow Jesus. I imagine they had not forgotten how they had deserted and betrayed him not so very long ago.

But whatever doubts there may be, God's response is always to provide reassurance. This holy God was and still is Immanuel - God with us.

For Moses, it was providing reassurance that God would be with him no matter what happened and that God would also provide a helper. Moses' brother Aaron, who was a smooth talker, would do Moses' talking for him.

For Isaiah, the reassurance was that his sin was blotted out and his guilt was removed.

For the disciples, it was the reassurance that this mission on which Jesus was sending them was not one on which they had to go alone. “I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Their faith may not be enough, but their faith alone didn’t have to be. The risen Christ would be with them.

Now, what does all this have to do with the trinity, you may be asking?

Well, I think that whatever the specifics of our commissions from God, whether -

to lead a people out of bondage as Moses was commissioned to do,

to be a prophet to God’s people as Isaiah was commissioned to do,

to go, make disciples, baptize, and teach as those eleven disciples were commissioned to do –

whatever the specifics, I believe the root of the commission is always the same.

We are called to share the life and work of the triune God. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit live in a familial relationship of unconditional love and trust. Their diversity is bound together in a mysterious unity.

God has always been and continues to be constantly moving toward humanity with the goal of that same sort of familial relationship of trust and love.

To be children of the triune God is to share the work of moving with God and on God’s behalf in love toward the world.

This world that was called into being, created, and formed by God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – intended to reflect God’s very self...full of love...overflowing with love...so full of love that God had to share that love in creation. A world of mutual, self-giving relationship.

We were created to love God and to love each other. To be in relationship with God and in relationship with one another – just as the trinity is bound in love and relationship. And, whenever God gives us a commission, God is asking us to share in the work of the trinity - to bring the world just a little bit closer to that intention of God at creation.

When Jesus spoke that day on the mountain, I don’t think he was speaking only to those eleven disciples. I think he was speaking to generations of other disciples. I think he was speaking to us here today.

We have encountered the holy in the risen Jesus. We too may have a fair amount of doubt mixed with our worship. And, we too hear his promise to be with us and to give us whatever we need to be able to do what he asks, to share God’s love with the world, to bring the world just a little bit closer to what God intended in creation, to be children of God – this one who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

AMEN.