

“Three In One”

Texts: II Corinthians 13:11-13; Matthew 16:13-18

The Reverend Joanna M. Adams

Morningside Presbyterian Church

Atlanta, GA

May 18, 2008

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you. II Corinthians 13:13

New Testament teacher Donald Juel tells of an incident in which a Princeton Seminary professor took his introductory Bible class to a local synagogue for Friday night services. The Synagogue was accustomed to Christian visitors, and therefore there was a cadre of lay members who could give brief introductions to the services and to Jewish history. This particular evening, the host began his usual remarks by saying, “In welcoming you friends to our synagogue, I want first to call your attention to the differences between Jews and Christians. The most basic difference is that while you Christians believe in three gods, we believe in only one.” Much to the professor’s astonishment, several of the members of his seminary class smiled and nodded in agreement. Clearly, there is confusion both within and outside the Christian church about the Trinity and what it means. (1)

This has been the case for more than 2,000 years now. St. Augustine once wrote, “If you think you understand it, it is not God.”

British writer Dorothy Sayers expressed her confusion about the triune nature of God by writing, “The Father is incomprehensible. The Son is incomprehensible. The whole thing is incomprehensible.”

To be sure, God cannot be put in a box and wrapped up neatly with a ribbon or words, but the fact that our human minds cannot fully comprehend the divine, or that human speech cannot fully capture the truth, glory and holiness of God, does not mean that God cannot be comprehended, or that human speech cannot illuminate the reality behind the words.

Today, Trinity Sunday, is the only Sunday in the entire Christian calendar devoted to the celebration of a doctrine. William Inge, former Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, once said that “it is the easiest thing in the world to say ‘God’, and to mean absolutely nothing by it.” Trinity Sunday is our annual attempt to give content and understanding to the word “God”. Actually, I hope that’s what we do every Sunday. A seminary preaching professor was once asked by one of his students, who was nervous about his first sermon, what he was supposed to

preach about. The professor answered, "You're supposed to preach about God, about 20 minutes."

I imagine that some of you are already wondering if you are up to this sermon on the Trinity. You might not have come to church eager to do some theological heavy-lifting, but I think you are up to it. You are Presbyterians after all! You believe that God is to be loved with the mind as well as the heart. You come to this church because you know that here, you do not have to leave your brains at the door. You come here, not only because you seek the experience of God as Emmanuel (God with us) but you seek God Almighty, who reigns over the earth and the cosmos as well. The late writer, Madeline L'Engle told of a period in her life when she and her family decided not to go to church. They were going to do without it. Why? "Because the church seemed to hold out to us a God who had nothing to do with the stars that crackled above us on cold nights, or with the frogs whose deep clunking announced that the earth was shifting beneath us."

Where is God to be found? To be sure, in the love that we share with one another and in the community that gathers in Christ's name, but let not the Christian church ever forget the God whom Isaiah encountered in the temple, of whom the seraphs sang, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of hosts; the whole earth is filled with his glory." Let us not forget God the Spirit, who is like the wind, who blows where it chooses, and is "everywhere the giver and renewer of life." (2) Let us not forget the God of the 4th century Nicene Creed: God who is "maker of heaven and earth, and of all that is, seen and unseen."

When you say the word God, what do you mean? Do you mean one great divine reality, to which all the religions of the world bear witness? Are you speaking specifically of the one triune God in whose name the Christian church gathers?

When you say God, what do you mean? Are you speaking of Mary's baby, born in a stable, or of the one who is, as Paul Tillich called God, "the Source of all being"?

These days, a new generation of atheists has emerged. They are represented by the writers Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, and Christopher Hitchens, all three of whom challenge belief on just about every front. But especially, their concern is with fundamentalism. In reading Sam Harris' book, *The End of Faith* this week, I found one idea that I agreed with. Harris wrote, "Belief is not a private matter, for every belief is a fount of action and potential. As a man believes [as a woman believes], so he [or she] will act." I agree with that. For example, if you believe you will be rewarded with "an eternity of unimaginable delights," then you might find yourself flying an airplane into a building and killing close to 3,000 people.

What I disagree with, in Harris' assumptions, is that belief necessarily leads one either into stupidity or into evil and destructive actions. It matters what we believe, what we hold to be lasting and true, and what we believe to be God's will

for the world and for our lives. I am motivated, on my good days at least, by my own understanding of the oneness of God, and therefore the inherent oneness of the human family. Believe that all human beings are members of the household of God, and you might find yourself giving up seven Saturday mornings to build a habitat house for an Atlanta family who otherwise would not have one. Belief affects / empowers action. Believe that God is love, and you will behave in ways that will reflect that love.

Or, maybe you won't. In the 16th century, people who believed in the Trinity went to war with one another. Denying the Trinity literally put your life at risk. In 1553, a man by the name of Michael Servetus was burned at the stake in Geneva, Switzerland, because he rejected the doctrine of the Trinity. Unfortunately, John Calvin was a part of this terrible deal, although Calvin did beg for a more humane means of execution than burning at the stake. That major fall from greatness notwithstanding, John Calvin was the intellectual genius of the Protestant Reformation. It was he who insisted that human wisdom is composed of but two parts, the knowledge of God and the knowledge of self, and that understanding the nature of God is the pre-requisite for any kind of authentic self-understanding. We are diving into the Trinity today, not only to enlighten our understanding of God, but also to better know who we are and what our place is in the grand scheme of things.

First, a few basics: the idea of God as triune is a helpful, clarifying way to name the ways that God has been experienced by those who have gone before us, but there is nothing magic about the Trinity. Its longevity as a doctrine or an idea is because it's a useful way to understand God.

Second, the idea of the oneness of God is not an original Christian idea. Monotheism was the great contribution of the Hebrew people to the ancient world at a time when it was assumed that many different gods were competing for the position as top deity on the totem pole. "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." This was the great affirmation of Judaism, and our affirmation as heirs of the Jewish faith.

The Christian God, the triune God, is not different from the holy God of Israel. The Trinity describes the three ways that Christians have experienced God's being and action.

Think of how a child experiences a parent. For starters, the child wouldn't exist without the parent. Sometimes the parent is loving and comforting; sometimes correcting, sometimes guiding, sometimes standing back to see how you'll do on your own, but the parent is still one person. Here is another way to think of the Trinity: Life is a drama. God is the writer, the producer and the director of the drama. God is one, and God is three in one.

For the early church, the presence and power of God was experienced in the person of Jesus Christ, both before his death, and after his resurrection. The early members of the Christian movement came to believe that the God of Abraham and Isaac, of Jacob and Moses, was fully revealed in this Jew from Nazareth, who preached as no one had ever preached before, who healed the sick, and proclaimed the good news to the captives as Isaiah had promised. Peter said it all, "You are the Messiah. You are the Son of the Living God." There is no doubt that the early church experienced God in the person of both the earthly Christ and the resurrected Christ.

Let me ask you this: How do you think of Jesus? Who is Jesus for you? The answer to this question is not simply an intellectual one. It is one to be answered with one's whole life.(3) I have always loved the fact that the early Christians were called "people of the way." In other words, they did not just talk the talk; they walked the walk.

Who is Jesus for you? A good man who lived long ago? A great moral teacher? Thomas Jefferson, a deist, wrote that he believed Jesus to be "a man of illegitimate birth, possessed of a benevolent heart, and an enthusiastic mind, who set out without any pretensions of divinity, but ended up believing them, and was punished capitally for sedition by being gibbeted according to the law."

As I was working on this sermon yesterday, I turned around to look at the books I have on the shelf behind my desk. In one corner of one shelf were the following books: *Jesus the Savior*, *Jesus the Stranger*, *The Meaning of Jesus*, *The Real Jesus*, *Misquoting Jesus*, and *Jesus before Christianity*. (Now, there's a title for you...*Jesus before Christianity*. I had to take that one off the shelf to remember what that was about. It's about reconstructing the life of the historical Jesus, rather than looking at his life through the lens of the doctrines and rituals of Christianity.)

There is only one reference to the historical Jesus outside of the New Testament – one reference to him in Roman history. To the writers of the gospels, he was the Son of God. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were convinced beyond a doubt, that Almighty God was at work in his life and his death and in his resurrection. The Christian faith is based on three claims about the risen Christ, that though he was completely and thoroughly crucified to death, he was raised from the dead. Secondly, that he entered into everlasting life with God. And thirdly, that he now shares that resurrected life, that eternal life, through the Holy Spirit, with all who will receive it. .

Last Sunday, Pentecost, we celebrated the gift of the Holy Spirit to the church. Jesus had told his followers, another would come, the Spirit of Truth, the Holy Spirit.

Who is the Holy Spirit for you? Notice I ask “who,” not what. The Spirit is one with the Father and the Son. The Spirit binds us together as the body of Christ in and for the world. I think of the Spirit of God as God here and now. Present-perfect tense, giving life. Out there in the world, creating new possibilities. Out there in the world, the source of art and music and philosophy and science. Out in the world, comforting the broken-hearted.

By the way I have organized this sermon, you might be thinking that the persons of the Trinity appear in chronological order: first the Creator, the Father; then the Savior, then the Spirit. But that’s not the story. In the book of Genesis, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,” what happened? A wind from God, the Holy Spirit, swept over the waters. God breathed into all living creatures. The Spirit has always been there.

The gospel of John tells us that the Son has always been there as well. In fact, without the Son, without the One who was the Word, not one thing came into being. “The Word became flesh and lived among us and we have seen his glory, as of a father’s only son.” (If you are concerned about the masculine language of the Trinity, you will want to come to church next Sunday, when I’ll be preaching a sermon entitled “Mother God”.)

What the Trinity says, is that the grace of God is not only personal, it is cosmic. As one theologian puts it, “The birth of the cosmos issues from the same tender heart of God who initiated and celebrated the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem.” The grace of Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit have been around and will be around forever.

One last thing about this, the greatest intellectual achievement of Christian theology: What the doctrine of the Trinity wants to say is that God is a community, a circle of relationships. Not any one of the three persons can do without the others. Dynamically, intimately, they are three, and together they are one. The God we worship and serve is in God’s very essence, relational, not hierarchical, mutual, not domineering, equal, not patriarchal. We who are made in God’s image, have a lot to learn from God about how to be human, the God in whose image we are made.(4)

I close with Tolstoy’s famous story about the three Russian monks who lived on a small island. No one ever came to see them, until one day, the bishop decided to pay a pastoral visit. When he arrived, he was dismayed to learn that the monks did not know the Lord’s Prayer. So he spent all his time with them, teaching them the Lord’s Prayer. When he and his ship had departed, and were out to sea, he was astonished when he looked across the horizon and saw the three monks running across the water toward the ship. When they reached the ship, they cried, “Father, we have forgotten the prayer that you taught us.”

The bishop was flustered, and he asked them, “What then do you pray?” (I would have asked them, “What are you doing walking on this water?” But I’m not a bishop; what do I know?)

They answered, “When we pray we say, ‘Dear God, there are three of us, and there are three of you. Please have mercy upon us.’”

The bishop said to them, “Go back to your island and be at peace.”

You might not remember a word I have said today about the one triune God, but I hope at the least, you will go home able to live lives that are holy and pleasing to God. I hope that you too will be at peace, this day and always.

In the name of the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sustainer. Amen.

- (1) “The Trinity and the New Testament,” *Theology Today*, 10/97, p.312.
- (2) A Brief Statement of Faith, PCUSA.
- (3) Jurgen Moltmann.
- (4) William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 36, Year A, April, May, June, 2008.

Prayer:

Merciful and gracious God,

Give us the faith to believe that the words now spoken to you in prayer and the yearning of the hearts now open before you will be heard and understood by you. Shed the light of your Holy Spirit upon us, that we might discern what it is that you would have us do, to serve Christ’s mission on earth.

To be his hands and feet

Bearers of his love

Advocates for his justice.

We pray today for Diane Jones and her family as they settle into their new home.

Bless their house with love and laughter, peace and good will.

Bless those whose hands have built it and whose sweat-equity makes it more valuable than the priciest real estate in the world.

Merciful God,

The tornadoes in the U.S., the cyclone in Myanmar, and the earthquake in China offer the sobering reminder that this planet, earth, which we call home, is itself a created being – with predictable patterns and chaotic eruptions built in to its nature.

Save us the energy of worrying once again about why bad things happen.

Direct our energies toward offering relief as we can.

Hear our prayers for those killed or injured and their families

For all those who still wait word on the missing

For those left homeless,

For rescue workers, medical personnel, chaplains and pastors, government officials.

We remember the promise of your constant and abiding presence in time of trouble.

“Therefore we will not fear though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea.”

We pray traveling mercies for our friends Walter, Lenna, and Jennye, for Chris and Sara.

We pray guidance for those here today who are at one of life’s crossroads

We pray guidance for healing and strength for those who are ill in mind or body

We pray guidance for comfort for those who grieve.

We pray guidance, protection, and courage for America’s troops and Peace Corps workers, and missionaries who serve in dangerous places.

Teach all of us gathered here to trust you more completely and to seek your help in all that we have to do, through Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray, saying. . .

(The beginning of this prayer is adapted from *The Prayers of Peter Marshall*.)