

Trinity Sunday
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Today is Trinity Sunday. And on this day in the year 1532 Martin Luther began his sermon on John 3:1-15 by saying this:

"I don't know why this Gospel lesson was selected to be read on this Trinity Sunday, for it really doesn't deal with the subject of the Trinity. The words *trinitas*, *unitas* are really mathematical terms. And yet, we can't talk about God without using such words. But at the same time, it is also true that when we use human language to speak about God, it seems to have a different ring to it, a whole new connotation. But the subject of this Gospel lesson is the birth from the Spirit and the putting aside of the Law."

I admire Martin Luther. He exposed unfortunate injustices that the Church's marketing people had committed in the sale of indulgences. But today is Trinity Sunday, and I'd like to talk about how John 3 and Romans 8 do help us to understand something about the Trinity. I think that Luther understates the significance of these passages and that they do have to do with the Trinity. To see why, we need to look at them from a certain point of view. But before I do that I'd like to make some general reflections about what came before today.

The church calendar begins with Advent, the celebration of the coming of Jesus of Nazareth, the messiah, "God with us". At this point we know that Jesus is a human being because he was born from Mary, and we are told that his conception was quite unusual and miraculous because Mary was a virgin when she conceived her son Jesus. So, maybe Jesus is kind of like a super-human, a super-hero that God has sent to make things right. But later we start to wonder, is Jesus merely a super-awesome human being? We learn that Jesus is God's Son, and that God's Son is the Word through whom all things visible and invisible are created. So we get suspicious. God's Son seems to have existed before he was born from Mary and before any creature was made. And, having read enough of the Hebrew bible, we know from Genesis that God created all things. At this point it seems as though we've got two persons creating everything: God and God's Son.

Return to the church calendar for a moment. The next seasons after Advent are Christmas and Epiphany in which we learn about and celebrate the birth of Jesus, Mary's son; Jesus who is to be called Immanuel, 'God with us'. Next comes Lent. Lent is when we consider Jesus's final turn toward Jerusalem and to his impending state execution by the Romans. After Lent comes Easter, our celebration of Jesus's resurrection from the dead. At this point we are nearly hysterical. "Huh?! Jesus who was murdered has come alive again." This is spine-tingling. Next comes Pentecost which we celebrated this past Sunday. On Pentecost we celebrate the descending of the Holy Spirit onto Jesus's Apostle's and onto many new believers.

And now it is Trinity Sunday. Why does Trinity Sunday happen today? One good reason is that it is at this point in our church calendar when we examine what we believe about

God, having gone through the various liturgical seasons. Supposing that we were Law-abiding Jews and this was our first Christian liturgical year, our understanding of God before Advent would have been based on the very important prayer from Deuteronomy 6:4-5:

"Hear, O Israel: the LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

But since Jesus came among us we have found out that God is Jesus's Father, and Jesus is God's Son. It would seem that the name "God" can be understood a little bit more clearly if we understand that the name "God" applies to the Father and to his Son. After all, whoever God is, God created all things visible and invisible. But if we want to be a little more precise, at this point we should say God the Father and God the Son created all things visible and invisible. One reason to suppose that Jesus is God, is by way of "doubting" Thomas's testimony when we called Jesus his "LORD and God". We who before Advent had assumed that God is one person, are now seriously rethinking how to think about "God".

In today's Gospel lesson we read that Nicodemus, a Pharisee and leader of the Jews, came to Jesus at night in order to ... do what exactly? Here's the scene. Nicodemus apparently sneaks his way to Jesus, likely because he didn't want certain other Pharisees to condemn him as they had Jesus. Suppose you go out to dinner with some friends to your favorite restaurant and you really want to eat what you know all your friends dislike. Not only do you know your friends dislike the food you like, but before ordering the food your friends talk about how stupid and silly anyone is who would eat the food in question that you secretly desire. Nicodemus's situation was kind of like that, but much more serious.

So Nicodemus greets Jesus with a compliment. He says, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Nicodemus compliments Jesus, as though he wants Jesus to think that Nicodemus is "on his side", but Nicodemus has no time to ask a question because Jesus immediately challenges him. Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above". Oftentimes this last phrase gets translated "born again". In any case, I think Saint Cyril of Alexandria (ca. 379-344AD) has it right when he says,

"Nicodemus imagines that he can become pious enough to attain salvation merely by marveling at the wonders Jesus had done. ... Calling Jesus a teacher from God and a coworker with him, he does not yet know that Jesus is by nature God, nor does Nicodemus understand the plan of salvation according to the flesh. Instead, he still approaches Jesus as a mere man and has only a slight conception of who he is."

Jesus challenges the way that Nicodemus is oriented toward Jesus. Nicodemus seems to think that Jesus is like a super-good human being that has done good works that are signs of God's work. But today, Trinity Sunday, let us follow Jesus in challenging the

Nicodemuses in our world who think that Jesus is only a great moral leader. It isn't that Jesus isn't a great moral leader, but that there is much more to be said. Much more indeed!

To Jesus's challenge Nicodemus responds as we all might by asking "how in the world can a person be born again after she has already been borne?" Jesus returns the question with another challenge,

"Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of flesh is flesh, what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above'. The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

In this passage Jesus speaks of Nicodemus's need to be "born of the Spirit" if he is to "see the kingdom of God". It is not enough to know and believe that Jesus has done signs and wonders, Nicodemus must be "born of water and the Spirit". What does this mean? For the purpose of a Trinity Sunday sermon let's see who it is that would cause Nicodemus to be born again? Jesus says it is the Spirit that brings about this new creation. In our reading from Romans 8:12-17 today we learn that, "if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are lead by the Spirit of God are children of God. ... When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ--if in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him." If it is not already clear to you that Luther seems to have been mistaken about our Scripture readings for Trinity Sunday in thinking that they don't have to do with the Trinity, I will make it clear. In the Romans passage we learn that this Spirit which Jesus mentioned to Nicodemus is the "Spirit of God". We learn that the Spirit of God makes us "children of God", and brings about and bears witness to us when we cry to God calling God "Father!" This is all but one baby-step leading to the Great Commission's (Matthew 28:16-20) explicit statement about the three divine persons in whose names we are to baptize God's re-made creatures.

When the ecumenical council of Nicea was convened in 325AD, it was not a room full of sedate speculators; it was a room full of people trying to come to a minimum consensus view about the Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and the like. There were some members in the room who really disagreed with one another. There were those, let's call them the "pro-Nicenes" who agreed with Saint Alexander of Alexandria, Egypt that God the Father and God the Son are the "same substance", what in our modern translation has been rendered "one being".

There were other members of the council generally associated with a Priest named Arius also from Alexandria, Egypt who disagreed and said that the Father and the Son are different beings. Those who agreed with Arius came to be called "Arians". These are not the Aryans of Nazi folklore, but those united by a theological position about the identity of God the Father and God the Son prior to the creation of things visible and invisible.

Arians believed and to this day believe that "there was a time when the Son was not". The Arians believed that the Son is a creature, albeit the first creature that the Father created. Jesus, the super-hero, not really God, but the best creature of creatures. Does their debate really amount to much? Is such a debate like two mathematicians arguing over obscure proofs that don't affect any of us non-mathematician folk? I should think it does, very much so!

If anyone has seen the movie "Armageddon" you'll remember that the basic plot is that an asteroid bigger than the size of Texas approaches the Earth. NASA needs to send up some crazy deep sea drillers to fly up to the asteroid, drill a hole, and blow it up with a nuclear bomb. Before they set off on their journey there is an argument over some technical matters. The white-collar NASA guy argues for Option 1, but one of the crazy drillers just so happens to have graduated in the same class from MIT as the NASA guy, and he argues for Option 2. Everyone else just wants to get the job done, but some technical details need to be sorted out first otherwise people are going to die. As the NASA guy and the smart driller-guy make their cases to the leading NASA administrator, the driller-guy mentions in passing that the NASA guy got a C+ in Astrophysics, but that he got an A. So, who are you going to trust in order to accomplish the mission? Are we going to trust what St. Alexander says or what Arius says?

The pro-Nicene position made various arguments against the Arian position. One of these arguments has to do with power. This is an argument from who can do what; its a "functional" investigation. They argued that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit all have the same power--as the Athanasian Creed in the BCP (p.864) later put it, "the Father is Almighty, the Son is Almighty, and the Holy Spirit is Almighty, and yet there are not three Almighties but one Almighty". It isn't like three people, John, Peter, and Martha together can lift 450 lbs, but individually each can lift 150lbs. Instead, each divine person has the very same power to do whatever this power can bring about. So, if one divine person does something, then the others in some way are doing it too. If the Father wills to redeem us, so too do the Son and Holy Spirit. Of course, only the Son becomes incarnate-- but all divine persons will that this happens.

Another argument that our pro-Nicenes forbearers made has to do with *what* Jesus is. From a third century point of view when the Nicene creed was originally composed, to ask "what a thing is" requires that you investigate a thing's most basic reality. Philosophers have called this kind of investigation by the name "ontology", which means "the study of being" or, "the study of existence". If you learn ontology you will learn about the most basic reality of anything. Consider the question, "Assuming like the Pharisees that we believe that only God has the authority to forgive sins (Luke 5:21), and that only God is the creator of all things, then what must Jesus be, if Jesus truly forgives and redeems us from our sins and is the one through whom all things were created?" St. Alexander's protégé St. Athanasius argued against Arius that if Jesus was not God, then Jesus could not truly save us from our sins. Only God is without sin, is perfect and has the power to redeem a fallen humanity which had been created good. But if Arius agrees that Jesus is our savior, then Jesus must be more than a finite corruptible creature; Jesus must also be "God's only Son", Jesus must be God to have God's power to create all things and to redeem us from our sins. John tells us "For God so loved the world that he gave his

only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” Our Nicene proclamation reflects this argument that Jesus must be God if he truly redeems us when we proclaim that the Son "is of one being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven ...”.

Our Nicene faith proclaims that Jesus is "eternally begotten of the Father ... begotten not made, of one being with the Father.” And we go on to proclaim that "by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.” Notice that God the Son is twice-born.

First, he is "eternally begotten from the Father”. Second, he is "made man”. There is an important difference between begetting and making. If you beget something then you bring about something that has your nature. Humans beget baby humans; rabbits beget lots of baby rabbits, and so on. But if you make something, you bring about something that does not have your nature but a different nature than your own. My friend Dave is a painter and has made self-portraits. These self-portraits in certain ways are similar to Dave, but they don't have his nature, they have "painting nature”. If they had his nature, then they could walk around, tell silly jokes, and the like. But they don't. Likewise, God "the Father eternally begets his Son” so that the Son has the very same nature as the Father. The Father and Son are equally God. And, God the Son is "made man” so that he also has a different nature. God the Son takes on a new nature, human nature. Because he has a human nature, the Son walks around, tells parables, eats fish and die by a state mandated capital punishment. The Son is twice born, eternally born as God the Son, and born as a human being from Mary. For these reasons the Definition of Chalcedon in 451AD proclaims that Jesus is fully God and fully man (BCP p.864).

But what about the Holy Spirit? Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born of the Spirit if he is to see God's kingdom. If the Holy Spirit causes us to be born anew, to make new creatures, then the Holy Spirit must be God intrinsically to have God's power to make new creatures. Only God makes creatures, and here we find that the Spirit is in the business of making new creatures.

In Martin Luther's mind a sermon on Trinity Sunday should explain words like *trinitas* and *unitas*. He is right. But as our Nicene faith teaches us, there are at least two ways to go about shedding some light on the Trinity. We can talk about God's power and the persons who inherently have this power, on the one hand; and we can talk about the divine nature, divine substance, or as our translation has it the "divine being”, on the other hand. With these two approaches, an ontological explanation and a functional explanation, we can express the unity of the divine persons first by saying they share the one divine nature and second by the unity of their creative and salvific actions. For example, all divine persons make creatures, all willed that the Son be "made man”; all divine persons will that "everyone who believes in the Son may not perish but may have eternal life”. The reason that our faith is focused firstly on Christ is because he is the incarnate God, he is the one who reveals to us our Father in heaven, and he tells us about the Holy Spirit who is our advocate and the one who conforms us to the character of God in Christ. The unity of the divine persons is not only in substance, nature, or being, but also in God's mighty acts throughout salvation history.

Our faith in the redeeming works of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the fruits we bear from the Holy Spirit are only successful, ultimately successful, if God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Otherwise we entrust ourselves to corruptible and undependable creatures who mess up the redeeming mission or may still mess it up; and such corruptible creatures might fail us when we know and when we don't know that we need God's redeeming power and work in the face of our and our neighbor's bad or horrendous failures.

If God is not Father, Son and Holy Spirit, then God is not inherently and eternally a loving Father, but God would be a loving Father only if God makes creatures who can be loved. If God were like this, then God is lonely before creation; and perhaps this God is a bored despot that made a corrupt world for amusement and distraction from eternal loneliness. But if God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, then God really does want to make all the difference in this good but fallen world. In fact, God has taken drastic actions and continues to do so. Sometimes these actions are very significant indeed, and we celebrate these at Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter and Pentecost. But in ordinary times God's actions are far less pronounced. In 'ordinary times' one's conversion experience is tucked far into the past, one's great and dramatic spiritual experiences are a thing in the past, or they viewed as a 'high' to be re-achieved because they are thought to be equivalent to what a spiritual life is. But spiritual life can also be hum-drum and ordinary. Consider but a few of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, peace, patience, kindness. These sound like things we might find ourselves having and doing when we are not chasing dramatic experiences.

Recently the Archbishop of Canterbury made a telling comment -- when we pray, when the Holy Spirit conforms us to the image of God in Christ as we feed on the love, suffering and victory of Christ, when we bear the work of the Holy Spirit, then we can share in some actions that only God has the authority to do and does through us, for example, the act of forgiveness. I don't mean to suggest that we can't say words like "I'm sorry" to our neighbors. I mean a deep, true, sustaining forgiveness like how God forgives us. When God forgives us it is the beginning of new life for us at the cost of Jesus's life. Like the thief on the cross, we can be forgiven even if justly convicted of a crime by the law of the land. And by being imitators of Jesus on the cross thanks to the work of the Holy Spirit, we can love and forgive those justly convicted of crimes against us or our community. It is true that sometimes people need to be let off the hook of the law, and sometimes they need to go to jail or have a "time-out". Sometimes our participation in God's mighty actions takes a long period of ordinary time. And the fruits of these long-suffering actions do come because Jesus is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. God is almighty, after all.

I close with a couplet and a greeting.
"For love is long, and longs to love,
Ev'r blessed by God's Holy dove."

As some of you may know, Trinity Sunday is the first day of the liturgical season called Ordinary Time; also called "the season after Pentecost". My friends, welcome to ordinary time. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, amen.