

May 26, Mary Curlew (Pastoral Intern)

I thought I would do something a little different for today's sermon considering it is Trinity Sunday and we all know how easy it is to slide into heresy when it comes to the Trinity... or pretty much any doctrine of the church for that matter. So, I am going to give you a little pop quiz to test your knowledge and rightness in the faith.

Don't worry, it is only three questions because it is Trinity Sunday after all! Gotta do three. I will not be grading your answers. Your thoughts on these questions are for your own edification and spiritual formation. However, if you find you do know the answer to all three questions with certainty according to orthodox Anglican theology in the Episcopal church, please see me after church, during coffee hour. I want your help studying for my General Ordination Exam for the priesthood.

Here goes:

1) In 50 words or less please give a concise doctrine of the Trinity. Please be aware that assigning different roles to the three persons of the trinity such as Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer in order to avoid using patriarchal language like Father, Son and Holy Spirit could be seen as modalism. Modalism is the belief that the three persons of the trinity are not distinct but simply different forms of the one God. It was deemed a heresy by the early church and is my personal favorite in the long list of potential heretical statements regarding the trinity.

2) This second question is in regard to the Gospel reading for today which speaks to the nature of Jesus and how Jesus saves, or at least that is how it has often been interpreted. Please explain what Jesus meant when he stated you must be born from above, or born again, to enter the kingdom of God. Some good news about this question: Fortunately, you find yourself in an Episcopal church so there will be no threat of hell for getting this one wrong. We tend not to espouse the doctrine that one must be born again or accept Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior to be saved and avoid damnation in the Episcopal church.

3) Considering questions one and two, please now describe how Christian theology relates to current ethical issues. For example, what would a trinitarian Christian ethical response be to the war in Gaza? I ask this last one with a heavy heart since in our current context this is the question that could result in further loss of life. None of these questions are joking matters, really.

So as you ponder these questions, I wonder if anyone came up with a quick and easy answer to any of them. No? Neither did I, but obviously the answers weren't really what I was looking for. I was looking for a connection with you all in our uncertainty.

For these are not academic questions only. These concerns have a profound impact on us both emotionally and spiritually. If the very idea of facing these questions

with their history of division and disunity, even violence, makes you nervous, you are in good company. I have to admit, when I think about how often religious doctrine is used to exclude or harm another human being, I feel incredibly sad, even angry sometimes. Within Christianity alone, it is hard for me to understand or tolerate an insistence that the Trinity be referred to only as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and that apostolic succession only be through males, or the belief that only those Christians who are born again will be caught up in the rapture, rejoicing all the way that all non-Christians are left behind to suffer. Is there any way we can answer these questions about our faith without excluding and denying the full dignity and humanity of those who do not share our beliefs? Can the unity of the Trinity and the joy we have in Jesus be something that helps bring us together as a faith and know better how to share our humanity with those who have other beliefs?

Fortunately, I was just at The General Theological Seminary for a May intensive class on Christian Ethics this past week where we discussed this very issue.

Outside of ethics class, when asked whether those of us who were preaching on Trinity Sunday should preach on the doctrine of the Trinity or stick to the Gospel, (by the way, I was the only one foolish enough to think you could do both) Dr. Farwell, the H. Boone Porter Professor of Liturgics at General, stated a bit off the cuff that if you are going to preach on the Trinity make sure you focus on the fact

that God is one since all of the various formulations of the Trinity ultimately are aiming to explain our monotheism, the oneness of God. Dr Farwell is a wise man and an excellent teacher. However, his statement got me wondering what it means to say God is one in a pluralistic and divided country, even a divided and often contentious Christianity.

Stephen Prothero, a religious scholar at Boston University, in his popular and critically reviewed book, *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World--and Why Their Differences Matter* states, “Almost all religions provide opportunities for human beings to convince themselves of their own righteousness, to speak in the name of God, and even to go to war on God's behalf. This 'blasphemy of certainty' (as he calls it) is also rife among secularists who in their case have not God but science or the proletariat on their side.” I offer this quote not to state that we should make no religious claims regarding our faith in a triune God or the power of Jesus to show us the way to the Kingdom, but that we should be cautious of being righteous in word and doctrine only. To rely too heavily on our doctrine, especially how it is “just like other religions” or radically different from another religion, draws attention to what we, as a global humanity, believe or do to the exclusion of recognizing who we are.

In contrast to the blasphemy of certainty, John Rawls, a 20th century American political philosopher, urges us to form ethical principles under a veil of ignorance.

This veil of ignorance would have us imagine that we have no idea where we may be born in another life and to form ethical principles based on that unknown. This experiment asks us to imagine what impact an ethical stance would have on us if we were born into the shoes of someone completely different from us, perhaps even an adversary. You may even say that John Rawls asks us to be born again. He certainly seems to be taking his theories right out of Jesus' play book just as Jesus says, "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."

I find it interesting that in Zen Buddhism, this state of being born again is referred to as beginner's mind or child's mind. Child's mind is a concept that represents a state of surrender, alertness, and humility. It's a time when there's little to no self-consciousness, and no judgment of others. Similarly, the concept of Ubuntu, originating in the Bantu and Xhosa people of Southern Africa and popularized by Archbishop Tutu and Nelson Mandela states that we are human beings only through relationship. Rather than I think therefore I am, Ubuntu states I am because we are, I am because I participate in relationship. What a wonderful way to describe the Trinity don't you think? Hey, maybe we just got closer to answering questions one and two by looking at what other cultures and religions say about who we are and who we can be? Seen in this light, maybe the concepts of being

born again and the unity of the Trinity, doctrines once used to divide us, can inform a Christian ethical response to the division evident in Gaza and in the United States.

My ethics professor, Dr. Ian Markham, writes in his textbook, *Do Morals Matter*, that “What is needed, then, is to recover a culture of belonging.” There is a mystery in this belonging much like the mystery of the Trinity or the sense of awe stirred in the birth of a child. Doctrine, therefore, is the attempt to formulate a language about the underlying mystery that provides the context for all living. Doctrine is not prescriptive; it is descriptive of who we are in relationship with one another and with God. And it is about who God calls us to be, namely children united and transformed.

Maybe then we can hear God saying in response to all that is going on right now here in the United States and in Israel and Palestine, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And we can respond with confidence despite our fear of not having all the right answers, “Here we are; send me!”