

Sermon Preached on June 12, 2022 – Trinity Sunday, the first Sunday after Pentecost

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The Book of Proverbs 8: 1-4, 22-31

Canticle 13, A Song of Praise, Song of the Three Young Men, 29-34

The Letter of Paul to the Romans 5: 1-5

John 16: 12-15

Holy Trinity, Holy Water

If you're ever having a hard time sleeping and are looking for something to read that will really knock you out, might I suggest the Athanasian Creed?

Though not as popular as the Apostles' or Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed is the third of the three creeds the Episcopal Church confesses, same as with my Lutheran tradition

Perhaps its length at 57 lines has something to do with that, or perhaps it is the circular language used as an argument tool for explaining both the Holy Trinity and the divinity of Christ that make it a little less user-friendly in our liturgy

Here's just a little example:

“For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost.

But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one, the Glory

equal, the Majesty co-eternal.

Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Ghost.

The Father uncreated, the Son uncreated, and the Holy Ghost uncreated.

The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Ghost

incomprehensible.

The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Ghost eternal.

And yet they are not three eternals, but one eternal.

As also there are not three incomprehensibles, nor three uncreated, but one uncreated, and

one incomprehensible.

So likewise the Father is Almighty, the Son Almighty, and the Holy Ghost Almighty.

And yet they are not three Almightyies, but one Almighty.” (BCP, pg. 864)

Are you with me?

It's not uncommon for preachers like me to whip out the Athanasian Creed on Holy Trinity Sunday considering 36 of the 57 lines are that kind of circular language explaining, or attempting to, the Holy Trinity

God, Jesus, Holy Spirit – The Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost – Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer

But, the Athanasian Creed, like many other documents and the other creeds, was developed to distinguish right belief, right understanding, what we call “orthodoxy” in the Christian faith of the early church, and many of these creeds and the plethora of books that have been written to try to explain this complicated theological concept are, honestly, quite difficult to follow

Why? – they were written because there were people who believed differently, taught differently, and tried to explain God differently

Many of those early meetings of the church that produced the creeds – or belief statements – that we speak in our liturgies were not celebratory gatherings like large family reunions. They were theological, academic gatherings that formed and created the church as we know it today

Those meetings weren't convened to think "how do we get more young people to come to church?" like we meet about and discuss today, rather, the creeds and the gatherings were the meetings that put boundaries around the beliefs and created the edges of our imaginations around who and what God could be in order to keep the wrong kind of believers out

And the result is complicated language and ideas like what we find in the Athanasian Creed.

James Cone, in *God of the Oppressed*, wrote "Few, if any, of the early Church Fathers grounded their christological arguments in the concrete history of Jesus of Nazareth. Consequently, little is said about the significance of his ministry to the poor as a definition of his person."

Have you ever noticed the Apostles' creed and the Nicene Creed jump from "he was born of the virgin Mary" to "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried" ? Um, I think you skipped a lot!

Cone goes on, "The Nicene Fathers showed little interest in the christological significance of Jesus' deeds for the humiliated, because most of the discussion took place in the social context of the Church's position as the favored religion of the Roman State."

In other words, these Creeds were designed by people who were in positions of privilege who were not out to shine a light on how God holds a preference for the less-privileged, these documents were not written as tools for new believers to understand who God is and how God interacts with the world – as we're taught to understand them today or in our confirmation classes years ago – but, rather these creeds were created by people with power to maintain power to maintain their version of right belief.

Most of those "family gatherings" – those councils that produced creeds – weren't pre-scheduled events, they were scheduled when the latest heretic movement was causing a raucous and needed to be put in its place

It's tragic in some ways if you think about it in this way, but perhaps it's also liberating to do so

Because, so often on Trinity Sunday, my colleagues in the pulpit are searching for just the right image, simile, or metaphor to help describe what those creeds are trying to say – to help us understand these deep, ancient theological concepts that shaped the church for centuries

As Debie Thomas jokes: “The Trinity? Oh, well, it's sort of like water! You know, liquid, vapor, and ice? Three phases, one entity? The Trinity is like that!” Or, “Think of a tree! The roots, the trunk, and the branches. Three parts, one tree. Or an egg. The shell, the eggwhite, and the yolk. Or a triangle. Or a three-leaf clover. Or a human family — father, mother, and child.”¹

The list could go on – and to be honest, they're not bad. Personally, I was staring at the peonies in our garden this weekend and thought – “The Trinity is a peony! The root, the stem and the blossom! All a peony, all different parts!”

It's not bad, necessarily, but I'm trying too hard

I'm playing too hard in the “which image is the RIGHT way to express the Trinity” - which leans into the belief that there are right ways and wrong ways and I'm not sure I'm the judge of that or want to put that kind of boundary around the Divine

Rather than trying to not only define the Holy Trinity but to keep the Trinity held within that definition sounds like I'm trying to hold onto structure more so than faith

So, then, if I let go, a little bit more, of trying to find just the perfect image of what and who the Trinity is, and perhaps leaned more into my senses, my

¹ Thomas, Debie. “The Trinity: So What?” Journey with Jesus. 9 June 2019.
<<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2251-the-trinity-so-what>>

intuition, my connection to faith, my experience – all of those spiritual gifts we celebrated last week at Pentecost – well then who is the Trinity to me then?

I'm grateful to Debie Thomas for introducing me to the poem "Holy Trinity"² by Kenn Storck, he seems to capture some of this wondering I'm finding in myself:

*It is Holy Trinity Sunday.
Time to dust off the Dogmatics.
Speak of God as H-2-O:
water with three parts –
mist, liquid, ice.*

*Or a three leaf clover will do
to disclose the Three-In-One.*

*Why do we bother with
images, icons, projections of God
worthy to be shattered
by the mystery unsolved?*

*How dare we define the Divine,
Domesticate the Godhead?*

*Go ahead: Draw your pictures,
Color your triangles,
Speak of the Three-In-One,
And the One-In-Three.*

*Use the Athanasian Creed litmus test
Of Father / Son / Spirit.
But all the while do not trust*

² Storck, Ken. "Holy Trinity" <<https://asacredrebel.com/2015/05/31/the-holy-trinity-sunday-may-31-2015-by-kenn-storck/>>

*The limit of language,
The confinement of metaphor,
The simplicity of simile.*

*The Ancients knew
One could not be
In the presence of the living God
And live.*

*Moses beholds God's backside,
Jeremiah – God's fingers in his mouth,
Isaiah God's robe and a hot coal.*

*The Christ confined in flesh,
Spirit unmanageable,
Cosmic-Creator.*

*Expand do not contract God
For God is the Great Iconoclast.*

*And we at last
With Job
Stand in the Divine Presence
Jaws dropping
In muted wonder.*

“The limit of language; The confinement of metaphor; The simplicity of simile...Expand do not contract God” Storck writes

How do you understand the Trinity?

Does your understanding fit into the neat boxes of the creeds with the three persons of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost and that for you is a life-giving faith? Well thanks be to God! That understanding aligns so well with the

teachings over the centuries of the church and how beautiful to see them alive in you!

Is your understanding of the Trinity different? Is it more felt than cognitively defined? Is it an image or metaphor that illuminates God in three persons for you? Is it helpful to think of the ways the three parts of the Trinity interact with you, like saying “Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer” that helps you understand what and how the Trinity is?

Does none of this fit, but you acknowledge that God is a wonderfully complex mystery and you feel God’s presence active in your life.

Well, thanks be to God for all of it!

At the root of the Trinity is relationship – relationship between the three persons of the Trinity, God, Jesus, Holy Spirit – and relationship between us and the three persons of the Trinity

So, perhaps, Trinity Sunday is not a day where we take a litmus test of how well we understand the complicated nature of the Trinity found in the creeds, so much as Trinity Sunday is an invitation to re-explore and re-imagine our relationship to all that is holy which surrounds us

And if this is a sermon that leaves you with more questions than answers, to that I say: “Amen!”