

Three Things

June 19, 2011

Whitefish UMC

2 Cor. 13:11-13; Matthew 28:16-20

- ✦ We celebrated Pentecost Sunday last week, and what a day it was. Beautiful, spirit-filled, and a little wild. And it's Trinity Sunday today, in the midst of Father's Day. An interesting contrast—from holy chaos to holy confusion.
- ✦ Pentecost is the moment in the life of the church when we throw caution to the wind of the Spirit in the truly chaotic experience of the day of Pentecost. Fire, smoke, mighty winds, red balloons, Spirit Holes—everything comes undone and then comes together in the Spirit. And the result is joy, energy, and the beginning of the widening of the circle that is the church. And that was last week.
- ✦ But if last week was chaotic, then this Sunday is confusing. We call it Trinity Sunday. On this Sunday, we are called not to celebrate an event in the life of Jesus or the church, but a doctrine that no one is really able to describe adequately. Celebrate? Or stumble over? Many of us can identify with the scientist who said of one experiment's result: "This is the sort of thing I wouldn't believe really happened." This complex doctrine of the Trinity has managed to tongue-tie theologians and scholars and baffle the rest of us. Madeleine L'Engle says that talking about the holy Trinity is attempting to talk about God's wholeness to a human race that knows only what it is to be fragmented and broken up.

- ✦ So why bother with the Trinity? What difference does it make to us as we move from that glorious day of Pentecost into the next phase of our life as a church? What about for us as individuals, and for fathers and children this Father's Day weekend?
- ✦ First, I think we need to acknowledge those special days in the liturgical calendar that the church has honored since the beginning. In the same way that we learn from history who we are and honor the past, we pay attention to these days so that we don't just slide over the hard and confusing parts of our faith.
- ✦ A few weeks ago, we did just what the scripture for today calls us to do—make disciples and baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Remember the sweet but poignant baptisms of little Kylie and her mother and uncle? What do we mean when we do that, and why do we do it? I think it's important to take a moment to consider the meaning of those words and why they sometimes cause so much trouble and confusion.
- ✦ Finally, I have to admit that I am still haunted by a little boy named Braden's (who is now taller than his mom and just about as tall as his very tall dad) struggle with understanding the difference between Jesus and God and the Spirit a few years ago during children's message. I freely confess that I have been throwing the different aspects of God—Jesus—Spirit around a little too cavalierly without helping the children and the rest of us understand what we mean.
- ✦ So here goes. And I begin by saying you'll never look at Neapolitan ice cream again without remembering the Holy Trinity. And I take the further bold step of saying that by taking the Holy Trinity seriously, you will end up celebrating the delicious treat of our God so

overflowing with love for us that it makes a Trinity Sundae bland in comparison.

- ✦ I can't tell you how many times I have heard people say: "I have trouble relating to the concept of God the creator, but I can pray to Jesus..." or "I believe in God, but I just can't accept the divinity of Jesus..." or "I am a spiritual person, but I'm not into traditional ideas of God."
- ✦ So today I ask you to put aside those similar thoughts, and stretch your brain and your faith to consider that good things really do come in threes—and One.
- ✦ The doctrine of the Trinity has an interesting history. It wasn't fully articulated (some would say it never has been fully articulated) until the early fourth century, when if you had been walking the streets of Alexandria or Asia Minor, you could have found people picketing, holding signs saying "Jesus is equal to the Father" or "all comes from the Father" or otherwise haranguing each other over arcane theological points that became literally a matter of life or death for those who held them.
- ✦ You can't find a concise definition of the Trinity in the Bible. Even though it is probably the most important doctrine of the church universal, you have to hunt through the scriptures to find how it all fits together. The two scriptures that come closest are 2 Cor. 13: 11-13, in which Paul pronounces this blessing: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all." And today's passage, known as the Great Commission, in which Jesus asks his followers to go into the world, make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and

the Holy Spirit, teaching them all that I commanded you. And lo, I am with you til the end of the Age.”

- ✦ So how do we approach this holy confusion? How do we try to grasp this mysterious God in three persons, blessed trinity, sung in one of the great hymns of the church, Holy, Holy, Holy that we sang this morning?
- ✦ Maybe you remember some metaphors for the Trinity from the past. How bout this one? The trinity is like H₂O—it can appear as the chunks of ice that keep our lemonade cool—a solid, yet it can also appear as the steam over our coffee—or it can appear as the stuff we shower under every day.
- ✦ In the fourth century, the trinity was first painted as a hand, a lamb, and a dove. The hand reflected the Creator action of God; the lamb, the redeeming act of God; and the dove, the empowering, purifying action of God.
- ✦ The Irish, or more broadly, the Celtic peoples, have been and are especially good at living with the understanding of a Trinitarian God without a philosophical struggle about how it is to be expressed intellectually. Perhaps the legend of St. Patrick stooping down to pick up the shamrock in order to explain the Trinity is a reflection of his belief that God is a God who is Three in One and this is the most natural and immediately accessible thing in the world. The Irish as a result find analogies all through the natural world and in their daily living, as in these traditional lines that demonstrate how simple it all really is:

Three folds of the cloth, yet only one napkin is there,
Three joints in the finger, but still only one finger fair

Three leaves of the shamrock, yet no more than one shamrock
to wear,

Frost, snow flakes, and ice, all in water their origin share

Three Persons in God; to one God alone we make prayer.

- ✦ So how can we be more like the Irish, and live the Trinity as if it were the most simple and wonderful thing in the world? Let me suggest three ways that we can benefit from our understanding of God's nature as three in one.
- ✦ First, take inventory of the Person of the Godhead that you feel most comfortable with. Which of God's three essences do you envision when you pray? Then try to imagine a new vision of God. Many of us center on Jesus exclusively; our hymns are often so focused on Christ, that sometimes we are strangers to the Father/Mother/Creator. And the Holy Spirit has been called the Cinderella of the Trinity because so few people have seriously considered or explored this part of God.
- ✦ Here's what you can do: ask the Holy Spirit to give you more of a hunger for the scriptures; ask the Spirit to speak a personal word to you. Ask the Spirit to end violence within you and our world. Or maybe you need to discover that part of God Jesus called Father. You may have trouble using only that name for God, but take a walk this weekend and thank God for being such a wonderful creator of such marvelous creatures. Praise to the Father/Mother/Creator God from whom all things flow and splash and buzz and bark.
- ✦ Second, live within the tension that you don't have to perfectly understand the Trinity in order to get to heaven or be a part of the reign of God. St. Peter will not be standing at the Pearly Gates with a

clipboard giving you a final exam on the trinity before welcoming you to eternal communion with God. Live in the Mystery—mystery is great and well---mystical. Knowing exactly the right answers doesn't save us. Knowledge doesn't save us. The church doesn't save us. Our good manners do not save us. *Our baptism does save us*—in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (or variation thereof.) *The Trinity does save us*—our salvation comes from the God who gave us Jesus the Son, sustaining us with the Spirit, that we might have eternal life.

- ✦ Third, try thinking of the Trinity as an intimate relationship that goes on and on. When we talk about the Trinity, the truth is that a loving relationship is within God's self that is absolutely whole and pure. God exists in a unity of relationship. One day, Jesus prayed a prayer. No, not the Lord's prayer, but this one: "I have finished the work you gave me to do. Now, Father, give them your presence, the same glory I had with you before the world was made." Jesus concludes his prayer like this: "I pray that they may all be one, Father, that they will be in us just as you are in me and I am in you. May they be one, so that the world will believe that you sent me."
- ✦ Perhaps we may someday look deep into our telescopes and microscopes and discover that relationships stand out at the core of the universe. Atoms function only in relationship to other atoms, says one scientist. As a loving relationship goes on within God's Person, so we should take our relationship within ourselves and our church and our world seriously as well.
- ✦ Here in our church, we take seriously Jesus' instruction to go and make disciples of the nations, to baptize in the name of the Father,

Son, and Holy Spirit. We call upon God the Creator, Jesus the Redeemer, and the Spirit of love to help us bring about the reign of God in which justice and peace prevail. We long to share the joy of Pentecost at all times, even in times of trouble and trial.

- ✦ We honor this weekend all those fathers and people who are like fathers to us. It's unusual that Father's Day and Trinity Sunday coincide—Easter was so late this year. But this week Joyce Murphy sent me a wonderful video clip that is perfect for Father's Day and Trinity Sunday. I want to share it with you. It's called "Three Things." Listen for the Trinitarian themes we've just talked about—about the importance of relationship above all else.
- ✦ As we look back, as we decide how to live for today, and as we see the future only dimly, may we receive vision, courage, and strength in the knowledge that God is holding us in loving relationship—three-in-one—blessed Trinity. Past, present, future. For lo, God is with us, even to the end of the age.
- ✦ And so, let us pray this prayer of David Adams, the Great Celtic poet:

Father, in the awareness of your presence,
Beneath the shadow of your wings,
In the closeness of your love,
May we abide.

Jesus, in the fellowship of your saints,
In the communion of the faithful,
In the church called to mission,
May we abide.

Spirit, in the power of your love,
In the fullness of your gifts,

In the guidance of your wisdom,
May we abide. Amen.