

God in Three Persons

A Sermon Preached on Trinity Sunday, May 26, 2002

At Hanover Street Presbyterian Church

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Texts:

Genesis 1: 1-5

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while the Spirit of God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

John 7: 37-39

On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and proclaimed, "If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

John 14: 25-26

"These things I have spoken to you, while I am still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not our hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

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Holy, holy, holy Lord God Almighty
 All thy works shall praise thy name in earth and sky and sea;
 Holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty
 God in three persons, blessed Trinity.

So goes a familiar hymn of praise to the triune God. Since this Sunday is designated Trinity Sunday on the church calendar, I decided to tackle perhaps the hardest theological problem for monotheists: explaining how one God is also three persons. We Christians share a good deal with our monotheistic cousins, the Jews and Muslims. We share reverence toward a sacred book, respect for God's moral laws, and commitment to prayer and charitable works. But we do not see eye to eye on this business of trinity. God is one, they insist. Period! Let there be no talk of plurality when speaking of God. Muslims especially find such talk blasphemous.

There are even some Christians who do not accept the doctrine of trinity. They object, and rightly so, that the idea of a triune God is not Biblical. Although the scriptures do mention God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, nowhere do they set forth the full-blown idea that God is one in three persons. This concept took some doing, some theological and philosophical construction, critics say. These critics point out that the concept of the Holy Trinity took a while to develop in the Christian community. It was not a doctrine that very early Christians espoused, as far as we can determine from the literary evidence. Trinitarian doctrine arose out of the controversies about whether Jesus was divine or human (or both), and these controversies didn't come to a boil until the fourth century. Unitarians, who eventually broke off from the Christian mainstream because they resisted trinitarian thought, are seen as radicals these days, barely Christian if at all. But, at least on this one point Unitarians could be seen as theological conservatives, because they still adhere to what the scriptures say about the oneness of God, instead of accepting a fairly late theological construction.

What was it that led the Christian mainstream to develop the idea that God is one in three persons? We cannot properly understand the doctrine of Holy Trinity unless we explore that historical question. Thinking philosophically about how one can be three, or three one, is not very illuminating, frankly. To understand the Holy Trinity it will not help much to explore the meaning of personhood, nor to rehash ancient ideas about substance and its qualities, nor to come up with parallel modern metaphors, like--God help us--three-in-one oil! No, to comprehend the Trinity one must understand the impact that Jesus had upon his followers. The idea of the Trinity evolved because people kept trying to make sense of their awesome experiences of the risen Jesus, of their memories about his intimacy with God and his God-like behavior, and of the continuing presence with them of a spirit that they associated with Jesus. If there were no Easter or Pentecostal experiences, there would be no Trinity. Trinity is a conceptual idea, and all conceptual ideas do take some constructing. In that respect, you could say that the doctrine of Trinity is made up. But, the experiences upon which the concept of Holy Trinity is based were not made up. They were quite real. What experiences am I talking about?-- experiences of the God-likeness of Jesus, experiences of him risen from the dead, and post-Pentecostal experiences of an overwhelming spirit which bore his traits, namely, the abilities to heal and reconcile and speak truth to power. Mathematically of course, the idea of trinity is absurd. Three cannot be one, nor one three. But Christians' experiences of Jesus during his lifetime and of the spirit-Comforter after his death led them to tie together God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit in a way that made perfect sense experientially, if not logically.

Another way to understand the concept of Trinity is to recognize that the three persons of the Trinity mark three stages of religious experience. Hebrew scripture first depicts God as Creator, walking with Adam and Eve in the garden in the cool of the day. Later, scripture pictures God as an almighty king and lawgiver. But, as Israel aged, this almighty potentate showed himself less and less. Even God's prophets stopped speaking. It were as if God had disappeared. Jesus made God reappear. He prayed to God as "Abba" and invited others to have a similar intimate relationship with God. No one had

ever seen God, wrote John the Evangelist, but this Jesus, who was in the bosom of the father, made him known. Jesus was so close to God, and so full of God's love, that he enfleshed God. A seminary student in our presbytery said she thinks of Jesus as "God with skin on." Jesus was a second moment in human beings' experience of God. Jesus brought God down to earth again so that people could experience God again in an intimate way, as Adam and Eve do in the Creation story. But, when Jesus gets killed, what then? How can people continue to experience the presence of God if they can no longer walk and talk with Jesus? That's when the Holy Spirit assumes the watch. What, or more accurately, who is this Holy Spirit?

For centuries and centuries the Jews had an idea of the spirit of God. Their word for spirit, ruach, means breath, or wind. The breath of God moved over the face of the waters, and brought order out of chaos, notes our Genesis reading this morning. But when Christians started speaking about the Holy Spirit, they had something quite different in mind from this abstract idea of spirit. By Holy Spirit they meant the very personal Advocate and Comforter who took Jesus' place when he departed this earth. The Holy Spirit, in other words, is the spirit of Jesus. The Holy Spirit bears all Jesus' characteristics, except that he/she has no material body. Rather, the Holy Spirit works through persons who are called to follow Jesus, bestowing on them various gifts so that they can continue the ministry which Jesus began. Our first reading from John this morning notes that the Holy Spirit did not come upon the disciples until Jesus had departed from them. As long as they had Jesus with them, there was no need for the Holy Spirit. But, when Jesus left, the Holy Spirit then became the continuing Christ-presence.

For us modern Christians the Holy Spirit is closer to us experientially than God or Jesus. Very, very few of us claim to have any direct experience of God or Jesus. We know about the first and second persons of the Trinity through stories, stories that derive from the faith experience of other disciples who lived before us. God is still largely silent, and Jesus has departed this earth, but the Holy Spirit is present to us. We know the Holy Spirit not by way of someone else's experience, but by way of our own. The Holy Spirit enlightens us as we study scripture together. The Holy Spirit helps us to pray. The Holy Spirit blesses us with many talents for up-building the body of Christ and bringing peace and justice to God's world. The Holy Spirit works healing in our minds and bodies, and helps reconcile us to each other and to God. Although the Holy Spirit may be the most difficult person of the Trinity to picture (because, like the wind, he or she is invisible), nevertheless the Holy Spirit is the person of God we modern people know first hand. It seems to me that if we want to make the Christian faith believable and vital to modern people, we would do that best by helping them to experience the presence of the Holy Spirit. So, let us pray for each other, that we may experience the power of God through the Spirit that was in Jesus, the spirit that raised him from death, the Comforter, our Advocate, the Holy Spirit.