

## Trinity Sunday 2023

When the bishop was here two weeks ago and wryly asked me who would be preaching on Trinity Sunday, I wanted to point to Deacon Mike, but I thought, that would be a cruel surprise.

Then I thought, I could say Deacon Jean, who was not there to protest, but I decided that the bishop's visit was not really the time to be playful.

In actuality, I enjoy preaching on Trinity Sunday because, just as the bishop said, there is no need to tie oneself in knots trying to make reasonable something that was instituted to defy reason.

Speaking about the Trinity is an opportunity to show that God is a god of relationship.

Whether consciously or not, I think the framers of the Trinity had a sense that those who think they know God fully are lost at best, and sometimes dangerous.

When they speak of God, it is really just a projection of their own ego.

They know what they *want* God to be, in other words, but do not know God.

They can become drunk on their own power.

God is who I say God is, so you better obey me.

The Trinitarians wanted to define God in a way that would hinder people from making such claims, from making God into nothing more than a projection of the human ego.

They wanted us to understand God as a being with whom we have an actual relationship.

We actually know no one fully, not even those whom we love dearly.

Discovery and surprise is part of the joy of being together.

When we lose sight of this fact, we reduce people to the ideas in our heads, and we miss  
all the beauty of relating to a different person.

The doctrine of the Trinity is meant to preclude any subsequent doctrine that claims to  
define God.

We are not to turn God into an idea, but to relate to the living God.

They encouraged us to remember that God is always partly a mystery.

Still, people try to get around the Trinitarian defense.

I still remember a student in seminary who prefaced his senior sermon by telling us that  
he was going to explain to us the exact nature of the relationship between God the  
Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

I thought to myself, “How is he going to do this? I don’t know even the *exact nature* of  
my relationship to my best friend.”

He thought if he could pin that down, he would have God by the tail, which is the danger  
of people who think they know God fully.

Interestingly, Jews and Muslims have different approaches to the same problem.

Jews prevent themselves from even speaking the name of God.

Naming, you see, implies understanding.

It is about pinning something down.

When I name something, I am determining how to relate to it.

When we are hiking and name a three-leafed plant “poison ivy,” we are saying that one should stay away from it.

When we name a five-leafed plant “blackberry,” we are saying that it is safe to eat its drupes.

The Jews are saying that, since we cannot control God, we cannot name God.

Muslims take a third approach.

They say that God has ninety-nine names, with the implication being that there are so many wonderful attributes of God that we could never grasp them all fully.

Despite these protections, people still try to dominate God.

When people think that they have things neatly worked out, it usually means that they have found a way of thinking that justifies less responsibility on their part.

There was a visitor here when I explained universalism, the theory that all people end up returning to God at some point.

I may have misunderstood her, but afterwards, when she proudly announced that she was a universalist, too, I felt like she meant that, if everyone was going to heaven

eventually anyway, she could just do whatever she wanted and not worry about others.

Universalism would say that that is a formula for postponing one's return to God.

Anyway, in Christianity, as soon as we try to define the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—heresy.

The doctrine of the Trinity is like a Christian kōan; it cannot be resolved.

Those who think they are getting around it are actually falling into one heresy or another, most commonly, that of modalism in which each member of the Trinity is understood as having a different role or *mode* of being.

I always enjoy hearing bishops' Trinity Sunday sermons.

I wait to see what kind of heretic they are going to be, but Bishop Skirving's comments about focusing on God as relational demonstrate that he is too wise a man to fall into such a trap.

Not so others.

I have heard people compare the Trinity, for example, to ice, water, and steam, and bingo, you're a modalist, a Sabellian, a Partipassian heretic (depending on which branch of the church names you).

Trinitarian theology says that there are three distinct *persons* within the Godhead, not three distinct ways of being a single person.

*The goal is not to know God fully, but to let ourselves be known fully by God.*

This is exactly where Adam and Eve failed.

After gaining the knowledge of good and evil, they hid from God.

In our reading from Genesis today, we did not get to that part of the story.

We only heard the first story of creation.

In the first creation story, the two human beings are the *last* to be created.

In the second story of creation, the man is made before plants and animals, and the women is an afterthought.

It is after this second story of creation that we read about Adam and Eve's eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

In other words, Adam and Eve start basing what is good and evil on their own reasoning rather than on God.

That is when we go astray.

When we lose sight of God's purpose, we tend to become focused exclusively on our own desires.

What the real estate developer sees as good—clear cutting and selling all the timber followed by building large homes of almost exactly the same plan, with steep roofs (to shoehorn in an extra bedroom) on tiny specks of land so that they can squeeze out every ounce of profit with no concern for the residents who will have no native trees, no shade in which to walk, linger, and mingle, and who can nearly

shake hands with their neighbors by reaching out the windows of their respective homes so that it feels uncomfortable to be outside—that may not be what accords with God’s plan for us, because it hinders community.

The results we get always depend on where we start—with God or with our own egos.

The story of Genesis warns that, when we start deciding between good and evil based solely on our own desires, as if we know better than God, alienation follows.

We end up locked in a struggle of egos without any outside reference—what I want versus what you want—with no reason that my approach is any better than yours except that it makes me wealthier and more powerful.

Once we turn to God, and God’s purpose in creating us, on the other hand, we gain a different perspective.

We see how important it is to foster community.

When Adam and Eve decide for themselves what is good and evil, they no longer want to be known by God.

They clothe themselves and hide from God, but God, the God of relationship, goes looking for them.

“Where are you?”

Without God to lead us, we are left with nothing but our egos, condemned to competition, to struggle, to toil, as Genesis puts it, which causes misery and suffering.

The Trinity makes clear that God is relational in God's very nature—God *is* a relationship, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This was meant to prevent us from slipping down the path of thinking that we know God, or even that we know better than God, and then toiling in isolation, without a holy purpose.

When we consider God's will, we can set aside our egos and create conditions that are conducive to community, to relationship.

The goal is not to know God fully, but to let ourselves be known fully by God.