

## Sermon for Trinity Sunday, 2020

Texts (Year A):

Genesis 1:1-2:4

2 Cor 13:11-13

Matt 28:16-20

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

When Father Pierre-Henry asked me to preach today, it was during a phone call about a week before my ordination. With the extra time that sheltering in place has given us, I immediately said yes, not realizing until after I had hung up that today is a Sunday that many preachers actually dread! I've even heard it said that when Mother's Day, or Memorial Day, coincides with Trinity Sunday, there's a sigh of relief breathed by many a priest or pastor because it takes them off the hook of having to preach a sermon on the Trinity! "*What is the Trinity, anyway?*" is a question asked by many adult Christians—and the conundrum faced by many preachers is to impart something meaningful about this central belief of our faith without sounding like a professor teaching an advanced course in systematic theology! Well, rather than calling Father back to ask him to choose a different Sunday for my first homily as a deacon, I decided to just bite the bullet, do my best, and leave the rest in God's hands. Whether or not my words offer some spiritual sustenance, I'll leave that for you to decide.

It's not for nothing that Trinity Sunday is the only Sunday in the entire Church year that celebrates a doctrine rather than a person or an event. That almost speaks for itself, doesn't it? I think it's the Church's way of saying that who we are as a Church, *i.e.*, our very identity, is inextricably tied to our core belief in a triune God—a God who reveals God's own self in three distinct aspects that are equally Divine and are, at the same time, Divinity itself. While the idea is mind-

blowing, and really beyond human comprehension, it also reminds us that there are things in life that are not meant to be figured out

The word Trinity never appears in the Bible, and it didn't exist as a doctrine of the Church until the 4th century, but the roots of the concept can be seen in various places in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. Our readings today are an illustration of that. In the Old Testament lesson, the Hebrew word for God in verse 1—*Elohim*—is actually a plural noun in this sentence. And later on in the reading, we hear God saying, “Let *us* make humankind in *our* image, according to *our* likeness...” In both of these verses is the idea of the plurality of God. If the writers of Genesis had been able to know then what we know today about physics and chemistry and molecular biology, they would have been able to see that there is a three-ness in creation that is quite remarkable. Here are just a few examples: human skin and the wall of the human heart each have three layers; the human body has three types of muscles; there are three layers of membrane that protect the brain and spinal cord; all food can be broken down into three types of nutrients; heat can be transferred in only three ways; the smallest unit of matter, the atom, consists of three particles. I could go on and on, but the point is that the loving fingerprints of our triune God are all over creation. While the writer of Genesis 1 could only intuit the complexities and interrelationships of the physical world, we, because of the advancements of science, can see beyond and below what is visible to the naked eye—and it is absolutely wondrous! May the breadth and depth of God's creativity never cease to amaze us! The psalmist said it well: “O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Today's Epistle, too, contains a hint of Trinity. We have to call it a “hint” because it doesn't contain the words, “God the Father.” Even so, that last verse—“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy

Spirit be with you”—became a well-known benediction that has been used in worship and prayer ever since it was written. The real takeaway, of course, is that the source of grace, love, and community is God, and that, if we live in peace with one another, the God of love and peace will be within us and among us.

The Gospel today is often referred to as the “Great Commission,” because it describes Christ’s last encounter with his disciples, during which he sends them forth to spread the Good News of Jesus to all the nations of the world, “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” This beautiful and beloved phrase—a prayer in itself—is known as the “Trinitarian Formula.” It’s the Biblical passage out of which the doctrine of the Trinity would later emerge as the early Church pondered the nature and essence of God. We hear it again and again in our life as Christians. It dedicates and consecrates us as Christ’s own at baptism, and it commends us into the arms of God’s mercy and love when our earthly lives end. It is woven into the prayers of the Church, and we begin and end every liturgy with it. Every time we invoke it, we bind ourselves ever closer to the God who exists as Trinity: One God in Three—a community of Love that flows and overflows into creation and all that is in it.

In the early days of the Church, when most of the world could not read or write, one thing that helped to bring understanding to the idea of a Trinitarian God was the use of visual images. St. Patrick, a 5th century missionary to Ireland—whose name is probably familiar to most of us—used a shamrock. In the 8th century, John of Damascus, a Greek theologian, spoke of the Trinity in terms of a word that describes a distinctive Greek circular dance known as “perichoresis,” in which the dancers’ beautiful and perfectly synchronized pattern of motion gets faster and faster until it blurs the individual identities of the dancers, and all that can be seen is the dance itself. In the 12th century, the image of a triangular

shield with lines drawn from each point that meet at the center, was commonly used. When literacy rates skyrocketed after the invention of the printing press in the 15th century, people began to create their own visual images of God and the Trinity from their own reading of Scripture and spiritual writings.

Episcopal priest and author Jim Adams says that doctrines of faith are not a series of “unquestionable propositions,” but rather “expressions of our human longing” for God. How beautifully put! Seen in that light, doctrines are meant to be pondered, and wondered about. Worshipping and believing in a God that is triune—Three in One, and One in Three—does not mean that we have to check our brains at the door. It’s not only possible, but wonderful, to be a thinking Christian and use and critique religious symbols imaginatively and creatively. So here’s a question: What images of our triune God speak to you...to me...to those we talk about God with?

There are many Christians—and we must acknowledge this—who struggle to embrace the images and language of ancient confessional statements that describe and define God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I’ve heard the words “archaic,” “unbelievable,” “obsolete,” and “patriarchal” being used by some who simply cannot conceptualize God as an old man, a young man, and a dove. At the same time, there are others who are offended by the use of the words “Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer,” or “God Beyond Us, God Among Us, and God Within Us,” instead of “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” But might there not be validity and value in using 21st century language and metaphors that speak to 21st century Christians—and to those who are searching for God? After all, all language about God is metaphorical. Metaphors are human constructs—and their relevance can change over time. I think there’s something to be said for the use of contemporary images and words to convey the ancient truth that God is

utterly transcendent, as well as present with humanity and all creation, and, at the same time, within each of us and the community.

No doubt the conversations and debates will continue. But thinking about these things, and talking about them, is not just a reflection of the *modus operandi* of the Episcopal Church; it's healthy and life-giving, for it leads to a greater understanding of the God who wants to be for us a God we can relate to.

Bishop Larry Benfield, of the Episcopal Diocese of Arkansas, said the following in his Trinity Sunday sermon a few years back: *"The good news of Trinitarian language is that it's okay to be a follower of God and not know everything. We don't need to start our Christian journey by understanding all there is to know about God and goodness. There is no exam that we must pass in order to be declared good Christians. What we get instead is the invitation to continue on the journey, to continue in our vocation, to expose ourselves again and again to God's presence in our lives in ways as tangible as a person or as uncapturable as the wind or as transcendent as what happens when we stand in a holy place."*

On this Trinity Sunday, may we be graced with the understanding that our loving God is a mystery to be lived, not a riddle or a puzzle to be figured out. And even if that's all we learn in life, it will be enough. Amen.