

The Moral Demands of the Trinity

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2 Corinthians 13:11-13 and Matthew 28: 16-20

Kathleen Norris writes that “‘Trinity’ has always seemed a word more strange than scary, although it has generated some of the most abstruse, mind-boggling writing in all of Christian theology.” (*Amazing Grace*, page 287)

Trinity Sunday is a day in the liturgical calendar devoted to a theological concept rather than a biblical event like the birth of Jesus or the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Further, it is a day devoted to a theological concept whose name, *Trinity*, appears nowhere in scripture.

Though the word does not appear, the Trinity does, the Triune God – that’s the fancy term – made known to us in three ways. In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus tells the disciples to go and baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Paul concludes the second letter to the Corinthian church with the greeting “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all,” words that serve as the benediction for our service of worship.

And more than that, we know the Trinity not only by biblical description, but by experience, and relationship.

We know the metaphors: water, ice and steam – three unique manifestations of the same chemical community. Or the three-leaf clover – three leaves yet one plant. Bonny and I took a cooking class one time in New Orleans. The first thing we learned to make was something called “Trinity,” an equal combination of onions, peppers and celery. Without any of the ingredients, the food simply would not be the same, nor nearly as good.

It's not always helpful that we've wrapped a fairly confounding set of doctrines around it all, but we have. And here is what we've said: we have said that God exists as three individual persons, individual and distinct, but not separate. Traditionally, we have known them as "Father, Son and Holy Spirit." They are equal. If they were not, they wouldn't be a Trinity, of course, but more so, we could not ascribe to them what we do.

- We know the God who called the world into being, who created the universe and all living creatures, wind and thunder (as we experienced so powerfully this week), the lovely fragrance of the lilac, the God who formed volcanic mountains and fluttering butterfly wings, who causes the human heart to pump and compresses coal to make diamonds. The God who made covenant with the Israelite people.
- And we know God in Jesus, God incarnate, the human window to God, the fullest expression of God's intentions for all of us, offered in such a way as we might understand. A mystery, yes, fully human, fully God, demonstrating in flesh and blood the lengths to which God's love will go. Jesus of Nazareth, who lived and breathed and walked with us, who looks us in the eye and knows who we are in our hearts, who spoke truth to power and brought power to truth, who ate and drank and laughed and bled.
- And we know God the Holy Spirit, conscience, interpreter, "empowerer." The one who comforts us in moments of hardship and heartache, who compels us forward when strength and courage are needed, who speaks to the church at key moments. The same Spirit that prompts our consciences, that moves in unlikely places and does unlikely things.

Our understanding of God would be incomplete without any of these articulations because our experience of God is incomplete without each of them.

Princeton Seminary theologian Stacy Johnson writes that "Trinitarian theology is the fallible, imaginative construction of the church's theologians. As such, it is able to point only indirectly to the mystery of its object," God. (*The Mystery of God*, page 44)

The early church theologian Tertullian offered a lovely metaphor, an image of the Trinity as a plant. God the Father, for Tertullian, was the deep root, the Son was the shoot breaking into the world and the Spirit was that which spreads beauty and fragrance into all the world.

Language is always inadequate – here are more images...

- God as speaker, word and breath.
- God as giver, gift and giving. (“The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing,” pages 8 and 9)
- God over us, God with us, God in us.
- God as revelation, revealer, revealedness.

Why does any of this matter? Why, when the world seems to be falling apart and human lives are hurting, from disease, from oppression, are we having such a conversation?

The theologian Shirley Guthrie wonders, in jest: “If no one knows what it means, and no one can explain it, it can’t really be all that important.”

Yet as we human types seek to navigate this broken and fearful world and hang meaning on our experiences and insights, it *is* important. Who God is, who we understand God to be and what we understand God to do, is at the center of our human quest for meaning and hope. Any conversation that brings us into greater connection with the God who ever seeks connection with us is a good one, despite our limitations of understanding and language.

And the conversation matters, because faith that seeks understanding is faith that leads to greater compassion and service. That is to say, our doctrine must help us live in the moment, any moment, *this* moment.

Miroslav Volf writes: “Because the Christian God is not a lonely God, but rather a communion of three persons, faith leads human beings into the divine communion. One cannot, however, have a self-enclosed communion with the Triune God, for the Christian God is not a private deity. Communion with this God is at once also communion with those others who have entrusted themselves in faith to the same God. Hence one and the same act of faith places a person into a new relationship both with God and with all others who stand in communion with God.” (*After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*)

The Trinity exists in relationship. So, therefore, must we, with God-in-three-persons and with one another, expansively, beyond the walls of the church. As Volf says, “the Christian God is not a private deity,” and so our worship of that same God cannot be private. The Trinity is in the world and confined neither by doctrine nor the church itself.

What does that look like? What does it look like when we take the Bible seriously, not literally, not symbolically, but seriously? What does it look like when we actually *open* the Bible and engage the words, are claimed by the words, are convicted by the words? We discover time and time again calls to justice, calls to peace, calls to reconciliation, calls to the loving-kindness of neighbor, and the continual drumbeat that God’s imagination is far more expansive than ever we could imagine, that God’s justice is far more radical than our limited sightline, that God welcomes all, not some, but all.

On this Trinity Sunday, 2020, the same words that help us to begin to understand who the Trinity is also communicate the moral demands that the Trinity makes upon us, for such a time as this. Those words are always true. They are true today.

Paul tells the Corinthians to “put things in order.” “Order,” a word very much on the tip of our tongue. Biblical scholars suggest that the better translation is “be perfected.” Be perfected. What would that look like, right now, in the face of the imperfection of racism, the deep imperfection of George Floyd’s murder, and the deaths of others?

“Agree with one another,” Paul says, and that seems important. But agreement on this side of justice is not true agreement, but chaos, and schism. We are in a moment where we will debate honestly and disagree strenuously. Yes. But we must reach agreement on the core principles – that all of God’s children must be able to breathe, that skin color should never either privilege *or* disadvantage, that of course “all lives matter,” but that all lives won’t matter until “black lives matter.”

Live in peace, Paul wrote. But simply said, in the voice of all of these peaceful protests – “no justice, no peace.” That is what the open word says to us. Now.

Jesus tells us to “make disciples,” and to “baptize.” And we should. Yet discipleship is not about converting souls for salvation, but demonstrating the

love and compassion of our Lord with acts of kindness and compassion, a reminder that baptism is for service as well as salvation.

“Teach what I have commanded,” Jesus says. That means feeding God’s sheep with the bread of justice, setting a wide and expansive table, being generous, leading by serving.

One of my favorite hymns goes something like this: “Once to every man (and woman) and nation, comes a moment to decide...some great cause, some great decision...”

We may *always* be in one of those moments. We are certainly in one now. A moment to decide. This past week has been so difficult. We are living in an anxious and uncertain season – economic crisis, health crisis, political crisis, moral crisis. This week will be written about in history books, and history, and the Trinity, will judge our response.

Yet...we do not live alone, and we do not live without resources.

Our Brief Statement of Faith affirms that “we trust in the one Triune God, whom alone we worship and serve.” That means we risk being controversial, embrace living with discomfort, commit ourselves to talk that leads to action. We remember that you can’t spell “Protestant” without “protest.” And that same Triune God will be with us, calling us into relationship, calling us into the world, with a transformative set of moral demands that is more than met by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Amen.