

The Rev. Becky Anderson

Sermon: Trinity Sunday, June 16th, 2019. Good Shepherd, Pawtucket

This is Trinity Sunday, the first Sunday after Pentecost and the feast day devoted to this central doctrine of the Christian faith we call the Trinity. There's a well-known story about a service celebrated at an Anglican Church in England where the Creed of Athanasius was recited by the congregation, as was its custom on the Feast of the Trinity. The people were reciting the Athanasian Creed aloud and got to the line which reads "the Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible." At which point a voice came from the back of the church muttering loud enough for all to hear, "the whole damned thing incomprehensible." Excuse my language, but this does seem a perfectly understandable reaction to the Trinity.

The Athanasian Creed was composed in the year 500 of the common era and has come to be regarded as the definitive statement on the Trinity, and certainly the most widely accepted. Besides our own denomination, it is accepted by Catholics, Baptists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Mennonites, Methodists, Nazarenes, and all branches of the Orthodox Church. I don't think you could get that group to agree on anything else. But the Athanasian Creed they will all sign on to. If by some remote chance you are ever bored in Church you can turn to page 864 of the Book of Common Prayer and read this marvelous theological definition that we call the Creed of Athanasius, and you will learn more about the Trinity than I can possibly convey to you.

Nevertheless, today I want to take up with you the weighty subject of the Trinity- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - because in the Christian calendar this is the day to celebrate the Trinity. It's not easy to celebrate a doctrine, but it is something I believe should be celebrated. Doctrine is an essential expression of a believer's faith, and contrary to some public opinion, doctrine IS part of the faith of the Episcopal Church. It's easy to think of the Christian faith as the miracle story of Jesus Christ, or as a history of God's salvation of a people, or even as a series of ethical rules. All these are in part, true, but none of that can or should be used to avoid this truth. Here it is: There is a substance to the Christian faith, especially in the Episcopal Church, a substance that forces you to something more than doing good or feeling good. There is a substance to Christian doctrine that demands you to think, to open your mind, use your imagination, and wrestle with the nature of God.

If you've ever lay on your back and looked up at a summer night's sky full of stars, you know how difficult it is to fathom the big picture. You lie there thinking unanswerable questions as to what is out there, exactly, and where does it all end. You wonder who made it and why, and where an infinitesimal speck of dust like yourself fits in. It's like those profound lines we heard in Psalm 8 this morning. "When I consider your heavens the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars you have set in your courses, What is man that you should be mindful of him? The son of man that's you should seek him out?" Answers about the nature of God are hard to come by, but that has never stopped us from trying.

The word Trinity does not appear anywhere in the scriptures, but we certainly get the component parts of the Trinity within the Bible. Perhaps most notably, we see at the end of Matthew's Gospel, the Trinitarian formula that has made Christians of us all ever since Jesus commissioned his disciples to baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. It seems clear that Jesus was a Trinitarian.

In the lesson from Proverbs, we see another aspect of God in the form of Wisdom, who is described as being created by God and being there beside him from the very beginning. Wisdom has traditionally been seen as the feminine part of the Godhead.

All these aspects of God - what are we to make of all that we think we know about God? Believers throughout the centuries have tried to describe God, but maybe the best any of us has been able to do is to describe the experience of God - how it feels when we are in the presence of God. And even then, experiences of God can be so different. Some days God seems to come like a judge, walking through our lives like Judge Judy, reminding us how foolish and wrong we can be. On good days, God feels like a loving shepherd who comforts and guides us, no matter what we've done. Other days, God comes as a whirlwind blowing us in a new direction despite our fears.

Maybe the best comment on the Trinity came to me on a Trinity Sunday when I found a brown bag on my desk in the church office. Inside the bag was a Three Musketeer bar with a note: "All for one and one in three. Happy Trinity." Well, I'm here to tell you, I hadn't eaten breakfast that morning, and I found God in that chocolate bar.

God defies imagination, but the Church, in its wisdom, has tried to describe the vastness and variety of God in the doctrine of the Trinity - that which was, that which is, that which is to be: time past, creation; time present, redemption; and time future; the ultimate justice of God. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Trinity is the attempt of the Church to paint that big picture of God and to explain it in ways that expand our ordinary ways of looking at things. If we cannot fully understand the doctrine of the Trinity, that is as it should be, because we cannot fully understand God either.

I like what the theologian Millard Erickson once wrote: "The doctrine of the Trinity must be divinely revealed, not humanly constructed. It is so absurd from a human standpoint that no one would have invented it, We do not hold the Doctrine of the Trinity because it is self-evident or logically cogent. We hold it because God has revealed that is what He/She is like. As someone has said of this doctrine, try to explain it, and you'll lose your mind, but try to deny it and you'll lose your soul."

Amen.