

Date: June 6, 2004

**SUNDAY:** Trinity

**SERMON:** Still Many Things To Say

Text(s): Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15

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There's a story that's well-known to many seminary students, supposedly true (but who knows?). It's usually told as a warning by the professor of systematic theology. It's the one about the young pastor, fresh from his studies, his head packed full of the history of Christian doctrine and other useless things, who stood up one Trinity Sunday before the congregation in his small church, to expound the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. As he announced his topic, he saw the eyes of the congregation begin to glaze over. Some of the older women who thought of him like a grandson were doing their best to look attentive and proud, but one elderly gentleman, sitting right down front was obviously preparing himself for a nap. But the young pastor pressed gamely on, and at one point in his learned exposition, he quoted the ancient creed known as the Creed of St. Athanasius, though Athanasius had nothing to do with it. It was a creed developed in the western church sometime during the fifth century in a period of great debate on the question of how Christ could be both fully human and fully divine. Part of it goes like this:

*Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Spirit.*

*The Father uncreate, the Son uncreate, and the Holy Spirit uncreate.*

*The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Spirit incomprehensible.*

At which point, the older gentleman, without even opening his eyes, muttered rudely and audibly, "The whole damn thing incomprehensible."

Well, at the risk of suffering the same fate as that young pastor, I'm going to plunge ahead, since this is Trinity Sunday, the only feast of the church year that is oriented around a doctrine rather than around an event in the life of Christ.

Why bother, you might ask. Who can get excited about a doctrine that, as one wag put it, if you don't believe it you lose your soul, and if you do believe it, you lose your mind? I'd be willing to lay odds that most of us don't exactly go around through the week, exercising our minds on the question of the triune nature of God. At least most of us don't. Some of us, at any rate, apparently do, as my wife would undoubtedly attest.

Back in the fourth century, I'd have been in good company. Gregory of Nyssa, one of the principal players in the debates that resulted in the formal definition of trinitarian doctrine at the Council of Nicea in 325, relates that people got so exercised over the theological questions that were at the heart of the debates about the relations between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, that he couldn't even go to buy a piece of meat from the butcher in the marketplace without the butcher wanting to argue about whether the Son was begotten by the Father or created. Somehow, I can hardly imagine a similar conversation when I walk down to the mall to the Farmer's market on Tuesday or Friday. Probably a good thing too.

I imagine that most of us, myself included, are too busy living to worry about trying to comprehend the nature of that Ultimate Being or Ultimate Mystery we call God. We may pray and worship God regularly, seeking God's help in our daily lives or, if we're serious, seeking to discern God's call and will. And that's as it should be. The shape of that belief becomes important to us at those moments when life interrupts us with something out of the routine, especially if that interruption is a painful one—the death of a parent or spouse, a near escape from an automobile accident, the onset of a serious illness or the breakup of a marriage. Then the question of who God is and what God's relationship to us is becomes a live issue for us.

It was precisely those sorts of moments that led the early Christians to reflect on the nature of the God to whom they prayed. The doctrine of the Trinity, far from being an

intellectual puzzle dreamed up by armchair philosophers and theologians who had nothing better to do with their time, was the response that grew out of a community struggling to find its identity, to survive state-sponsored persecution, to live lives of integrity and meaning in a world that was changing so drastically under the barbarian invasions of Rome and the rapid urbanization that they could hardly keep up with it. Those early church leaders who thought and wrote and debated understood something that is all too easily overlooked: if we want to know God, if we want to make sense out of our lives as we encounter the changes and chances of life, then it's very important that we pray rightly, to make sure that our prayer is directed to the true God rather than an idol of our own making. If we think the wrong things about God, then we'll always come up with the wrong answers about our own lives and relationships, since we always orient our lives around that which we regard as the ultimate reality. We become like the gods that we worship and to which we give allegiance. C. S. Lewis described the consequences of thinking wrongly about God very graphically: "Horrible nations," he said, "have horrible gods." The doctrine of the Trinity is not only about God, you see; it's about us as well.

While the full-fledged doctrine of the Trinity, was the product of continuous development through the first four centuries of Christianity, the basis for it is found in the everywhere in the New Testament. The earliest followers of Jesus, all of them trained to the worship of the awesome and holy God of Israel, were probably shocked the first time they heard Jesus address God as "*abba*," which means "papa" or "daddy." And when he gave them, as a model for prayer, the prayer that we pray each week, he urged them to address God as "Our Father" as well. And when he spoke to them, as he does in our gospel lesson today, "*I still have many things to say to you. . . . When the Spirit of truth comes he will guide you into all truth. . . . he*

*will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine,*" he is expanding and stretching their understanding of God in altogether new ways. Those new ways of thinking of God began to grasp them after Jesus' crucifixion, when they continued to experience his presence in their prayer, their worship, their communal life together. This drove them to reflect more deeply on the nature of the God to whom they prayed. Speaking of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in their prayers and liturgy was the result of their having experienced God, through Jesus, in the Spirit, when they were gathered in Jesus' name.

It's understandable, perhaps, that in our day, some people get hung up on that traditional trinitarian language. We're all aware, I think, of the problems many people have of referring to God as "Father," particularly those who haven't had healthy or happy experiences with their earthly fathers, or women who have felt oppressed in societies dominated by men. And these painful memories of dysfunctional parent-child relationships or patriarchal social patterns can be a real stumbling block to them, when they try to relate to a Heavenly Father.

But this is precisely where the doctrine of the Trinity comes down out of the theological stratosphere and touches our real life. Discovering the wholeness of loving relationships that exists within and among the three personas of the Holy Trinity can bring healing for those painful memories of abusive or negligent or indifferent earthly fathers. To experience God as Jesus did, as a loving *abba* or "papa" can liberate us from all those painful memories, and provide us with a model of how parental love should and can be lived out in our relationships with our own parents or our own children. From the community of relationships that *is* God, we can learn how to have genuine community among ourselves. To stop calling God Father because of our bad experiences with earthly fathers or patriarchal structures would be to lose something

precious. It's not that we believe "Father" is wholly adequate or the only language or the only image that says something true about God. Rather, it affirms our intimate relationship of dependence and trust to the One in whose image, the book of Genesis tells us, we are created, both male and female. At the very center of God's own being, is the wholeness of relationships, the wholeness of loving community which we humans can always only know in part. If we can love another person at all, it is because God's own being already comprehends and models that love for us and through us.

We do need to be open to other language or images which may also communicate something true about God and enrich our understanding and deepen our relationship to God. This, is what I take from Jesus' statement that he "*still has many things to say to us.*" There is always a temptation to think that the language we use fully captures the reality we're speaking about. We need to remember that language is always symbolic, regardless of whether we're talking about God or aardvarks, quasars or crocodiles. St. Augustine understood this when he said that the doctrine of the Trinity was never conceived as an attempt to say everything there was to say about God, but rather an attempt to avoid the even worse alternative of saying nothing at all. Our language can never become more important than the mystery of personhood, either our own or God's. For unless we encounter the mystery of God's own being in one another, we shall never know God at all. "*The one who loves is the one who is born of God and knows God, for God is love.*" says St. John. It is not by language that we enter into the encounter with the mystery that is God; it is by love. Language helps us understand; love brings us near.

One of my favorite strugglers to articulate some of those things which God still has to say is the fourteenth century Englishwoman, Julian of Norwich. Listen to this excerpt from her great classic work *Revelations of Divine Love*.

*So, when he made us, God almighty was our kindly Father, and God all-wise our kindly Mother, and the Holy Spirit their love and goodness; all one God, one Lord. . . . I saw the blessed Trinity working. I saw that there were these three attributes: fatherhood, motherhood, and lordship--all in one God.*

*Thus in our Father, God Almighty, we have our being. In our merciful Mother we have reformation and renewal, and our separate parts are integrated into perfect humanity. In yielding to the gracious impulse of the Holy Spirit, we are made perfect. God is as really our Mother as he is our Father.*

Was Julian condemned for being a radical feminist or perpetrating a trinitarian heresy? Far from it; she was named a "doctor of the church" for her contributions to deepening the church's understanding of trinitarian theology. Julian's references to God as our Mother make her sound strangely contemporary, but her real contribution is not so much the imagery she uses as it is the fact that she understands the doctrine of the Trinity to be a framework out of which we live rather than something to which we merely give intellectual assent. God, in all the fullness of the divine being, as Father, Mother, Son, Lady Wisdom, and Incarnate Word, draws us into that being and lives his life in us, and through us. As we encounter the mystery of a God who is a full community of loving relationships, we too take our first steps in learning how to love others. And as we more and more learn to love others, the image of God is perfected in us, so that we become all that we were created to be.