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Genesis 1:1-5 & Matthew 28: 16-20

A Trinitarian Commission

Over the past few weeks we heard the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to his disciples from the Gospels of John and Luke. The Gospel of Mark ends with the women at the empty tomb being told: “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” So the women went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

The Gospel of Matthew tells the story in a similar way to Mark, in that the women were told to tell the disciples that Jesus will meet them in Galilee. However, unlike Mark, where we hear that the women said nothing to anyone, in the Gospel of Matthew the women run to tell the disciples. Jesus meets them along the way and says, “Greetings!” And the women go to him, take hold of his feet, and worship him. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers and sisters to go to Galilee; there they will see me.” And they do, as we hear in our scripture this morning, the very end of the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 28, verses 16-20,

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw Jesus, they worshiped him, but they doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” **The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

Last week we learned a little of the history of Pentecost Sunday, the Sunday when the breath of the Holy Spirit, when the fire of the Holy Spirit descended on the crowds gathered to celebrate the Festival of Weeks, and those baptized that day birthed the church. The Sunday following Pentecost is designated in the church liturgical calendar as Trinity Sunday – the Sunday where we proclaim the mystery of our faith in the triune God: Father (or Parent), Son and Holy Spirit, One-in-Three and Three-in-One.

As far as church holidays go, Trinity Sunday is often skipped over by pastors. For some, it may be for theological reasons, as delving into the finer points of the language of the Trinity can be challenging. For others, I think they are ready to be done with the “holiday seasons” and instead dive into the rhythms of the season of ordinary time. I think this is especially the case when Easter falls late in the calendar, and Pentecost and Trinity Sundays fall squarely in the summer, like this year. I am kind of splitting the difference – we are hearing a traditional

Trinitarian Sunday scripture. However, our liturgical colors reflect Ordinary Time, rather than the traditional white for Trinity Sunday.

Trinity Sunday is a somewhat unique liturgical holiday because it is centered around a church doctrine rather than an event like Pentecost or Easter or even Ascension Sunday. As the PC(USA) *Companion to the Book of Common Worship* states, “Trinity Sunday, in a sense, synthesizes all we have celebrated over the past months which have centered on God’s mighty acts: Christmas-Epiphany celebrating God’s taking flesh and dwelling among us in Jesus Christ; Easter celebrating Christ’s death and resurrection for us; Pentecost celebrating God the Holy Spirit becoming our Sanctifier, Guide, and Teacher. It is, therefore, a fitting transition to that part of the year when Sunday by Sunday the work of God among us is unfolded in a more general way. In celebrating Trinity Sunday, we remember that every Lord’s Day is consecrated to the triune God. On the first day of the week, God began creation. On the first day of the week, God raised Jesus from the grave. On the first day of the week, the Holy Spirit descended on the newly born church. Every Sunday is a day of the Holy Trinity.”¹

While we don’t explicitly address the Trinitarian understanding of God every week, we do address our worship of the Triune God implicitly. As the *Companion to the Book of Common Worship* says, “The triune God is the basis of all we are and do as Christians. In the name of this triune God we are baptized. As the baptized ones we bear the name of the triune God in our being. We are of the family of the triune God. We affirm this parentage when, in reciting the creeds, we say what we believe. Our discipleship is rooted in the mighty acts of this triune God who is active in redeeming the world. The triune God is the basis of all our prayers...”²

When you pray, to whom do you pray?” One of my seminary professors asked us in a class in my first semester of seminary. My first thought was, well seminary is going to be pretty easy, if this is the kind of questions we get. Of course, I pray to God. The professor gave us a few minutes to think about this before answering, which then led to my second thought, that this must be a trick question or why else would she have given us so much time to ponder to answer. So I am going to ask you all to take a moment and think about your own prayer life and to whom you pray. (*space*)

In the class that day, I thought it about it some more, thinking back on my years of praying and the answer was still God. Although I did remember some times when I prayed to my grad school roommate’s dead Aunt Lina. According to Kim, Aunt Lina is the patron saint of finding parking places and getting concert tickets from calling radio station hotlines. Any of you

¹ [Companion to the Book of Common Worship](https://pcusa.org/about-pcusa/agencies-entities/interim-unified-agency/ministry-areas/theology-worship/worship/christian-year/trinity-sunday) (Geneva Press, 2003, 149-150); online at <https://pcusa.org/about-pcusa/agencies-entities/interim-unified-agency/ministry-areas/theology-worship/worship/christian-year/trinity-sunday>

² *ibid*

remember those days? Having to be one of the first 10 callers when calling in from a phone with no-redial. So I'll admit to praying to dead Aunt Lina a few times in my life.

There were 12 of us in the class and after our pondering time was over we answered to whom we prayed. The six of us white Presbyterians all said "God." Ok – "good answer" as they would say in Family Feud. I was safe. The other six students – Presbyterians of color, a couple of Baptists, Church of God in Christ and Pentecostal – answered either "Jesus" or some variation on the "Spirit." Noone mentioned dead Aunt Lina, so I was glad I kept that to myself. But it was a big aha moment for me – certainly not the last one I had – that the way I did things – the way I had been taught – the way I had seen things done in the church was not the only way things could be done. The professor further asked those of us who said "God" – did we mean "God, the Father, the first person of the Trinity" or were we using "God" to refer to the Triune God?" Good question. We all just kind of looked at each other, and I remember thinking, well I guess seminary is going to be harder than I initially thought. We all kind of blamed it on the Lord's Prayer.

As we spent time studying prayer in this class, the professor encouraged us to vary our routines and try to expand our prayers beyond the language we typically used. To begin our prayers and explicitly pray to Jesus. To begin our prayers and explicitly pray to the Spirit. And to allow truly Trinitarian understanding of God to shape our faith through prayer. While I still default to God more often than not, I am more intentional about praying to and through Jesus and the Spirit. This is especially the case when I think about the language that author and theologian Frederick Buechner uses to describe the Trinity: "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit mean that the mystery beyond us, the mystery among us, and the mystery within us are all the same mystery. Thus the Trinity is a way of saying something about us and the way we experience God."³

I think Buechner eloquently states what theologians for so many centuries have struggled to communicate – why does the Trinity matter? How does a Trinitarian understanding of God shape our faith? Why do we use a Trinitarian formula when we baptize and why precisely did Jesus tell the disciples to go into the world and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit? Because we are called to experience the great vastness of the creator God of the cosmos, the God who reminds us that there is "mystery beyond us," mystery beyond what we can see with our two eyes and hear with our two ears and feel with our fingers and understand with the 100 billion neurons in our brain. You heard Nina read the stirring words from Genesis 1 this morning: "When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light." Jesus commissioned the disciples to go

³ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking. A Seekers ABC*, 1973. This quote is online at <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2017/6/15/trinity>

into the world and tell people about this God – a creator parent – who is bigger than our imagination and yet shares intimate whispers to quiet the chaos of our lives.

We are also called to experience “the mystery among us.” That incredible mystery that happens when we are in community. Jesus commissioned the disciples to create that community. To go into towns and villages, cities and farming communities. Places where there were different languages and different customs than what they were used to. To go into those places and see the face of Christ in someone whose language they didn’t understand, whose customs seem exotic, whose ethnicity is viewed suspiciously by those in power. The mystery that happens when strangers become friends, when relationships are healed through forgiveness. Jesus commissioned his disciples to gather people around the table of grace and feed them. This is God as “the mystery among us.”

Jesus likewise commissioned the disciples to go into the world and make disciples in the name of “the mystery within us.” The disciples had not experienced the winds of Pentecost when they received this Great Commission. They had heard Jesus promise that he would leave an advocate, a companion, one who would be with them in their lives and ministry. That Pentecost morning the disciples got a crash course in what it means to experience “the mystery within us” as people heard Peter preach each in their own language. As the church grew beyond Jerusalem and Judea, into Samaria and Syria, into northern Africa and Asia Minor, into Greece and Rome, and throughout the world, it was the “the mystery within us” that became the binding and unifying source. That inspired magnificent art and architecture, poems and prose. That spawned solitary contemplative practices and communal singing of great hymns. Jesus commissioned the disciples and us “to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the “mystery within us.” And Jesus said, “remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

I am with you until the end of the age. This is Jesus’ promise to us, to all who came before us and to all who will follow us. We are commissioned with this promise – a promise that says something about us and the way we experience God. A promise that we were called to be disciples to experience “the mystery beyond us, the mystery among us, and the mystery within us.” And we are commissioned to call others to experience this same mystery. May it be so.