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Genesis 1:1-5, John 1:1-5, and Matthew 28:16-20

A Triune Beginning and a Triune Sending

Two weeks ago we recognized Ascension Sunday, when Jesus ascended into heaven, leaving the disciples with the promise of the Holy Spirit to guide them. Last week we celebrated that gift - the Holy Spirit descending on the gathered crowds at Pentecost. Following Pentecost we move into a season of the church known as "Ordinary Time" which is marked by the absence of any specific holidays or festivals or seasons of preparation. Ordinary Time begins with Trinity Sunday, a Sunday when we explore the mystery of one of Christianity's most important theological tenets, the Trinity.

We just heard Jack share two texts that allude to God acting through multiple persons. Our final text this morning is more explicit, with Jesus specifically giving the disciples a send-off to be his disciples using trinitarian language. Here now these final verses from the Gospel of Matthew.

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, 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**

This text from Matthew's Gospel was the first text I ever preached in a church setting. It is one of the designated texts for Trinity Sunday in Year A of the Revised Common Lectionary, the three-year cycle of texts that shapes our worship. So if you count backwards, it would have been the designated Trinity Sunday text in 2023, 2020, 2017, and 2014, the summer after my first year in seminary when I served as an intern at Emory Presbyterian Church in Atlanta. That year Trinity Sunday fell on June 15 and it was my third Sunday at the church. I know it was the third Sunday, because my Facebook feed just popped up with a memory of me being welcomed at Emory with a laying on of hands. No comments necessary on living in a world where my significant memories need to be refreshed by social media.

That said, I do, however, remember the sermon, or at least what prompted my preaching that week. The pastor at the church at that time disliked preaching on the Trinity. She found it hard to relate to people's everyday lives and hard to explain what is essentially a mystery. So cue the intern... nothing like having your first sermon to a new congregation be on a weighty theological matter. I was game - probably steeped in the bravado that actually hadn't yet taken the required two semesters of theology (second year courses) and semester of

reformed theology (a third year course), so I was not yet weighed down by all of theories of the Trinity one studies in seminary. Instead, my sermon that Sunday focused on the line “When they saw Jesus, they worshiped him, but they doubted.”

The disciples doubted. Reading through the sermon I preached that day in 2014 was a fascinating look at how much, and how little, has changed in my understanding of faith in the intervening 12 years. And the place that doubt held in my faith then and the place it holds now. In that sermon I walked through the various places in the gospels where the disciples had expressed their doubts and fears. I had taken New Testament, so this was an opportunity to share what I learned in that class. And I shared how Jesus had offered the disciples reassurance through a sometimes explicit, but more often implicit, trinitarian understanding of God as the one who offers companionship and strength for their journey.

I related my own doubts and fears as I was beginning my call into ordained ministry, leaving behind the security of the classroom and laboratory that had nurtured me and given me structure for so many years. My doubts and fears about the unknowns of making disciples and teaching about the work of Jesus. About the doubts and fears that those in the congregation might have with respect to unknowns of their call to make disciples and teach about the work of Jesus. I asked the congregation these following two questions that were projections of my own doubts and fears (now bear in mind I had been at the church a total of 3 weeks at that time):

What is that you fear? That someone will make a cynical comment or laugh when you invite them to church on Sunday? Or that they might get a glimpse of your faith and your trust in Jesus?

What do you doubt? That you will not know what to say if you visit that friend whose spouse just was diagnosed with cancer? Or that you might have to acknowledge that sometimes there are no words, but that faith, hope and love abide?

Twelve years later, these are doubts and fears that still resonate with me as a pastor. And it interesting to see that I preached on a theme I consistently preach on today: We never engage in Christ’s work in the world alone. I shared that Jesus said “remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” This promise allowed the disciples to say yes to some pretty hard and scary stuff. And this promise allows all of us to say “yes” to Jesus. For me to say “yes” when the cynics say it is foolish. For this congregation to say “yes” to being in fellowship each Sunday. For all of us to say “yes there is good news to share” to the community outside of our church. It is a challenge to do this in a cynical world, where our fears of appearing foolish and our doubts and disappointments can leave us jaded and paralyzed.

I ended the sermon with a quote from Stephen Colbert, someone whose voice has spoken words for wisdom to me for many years. I said that since it is graduation season, we might be

well served to heed the advice of a graduation speech – that of Stephen Colbert in a 2006 address to Knox College graduates. He advised: "Cynicism is a self-imposed blindness, a rejection of the world because we are afraid it will hurt us or be disappointed in us. Cynics always say no ... but for as long as you have the strength to, say yes."¹

So 12 years later, I confess that cynicism can still get the best of me at times. And I confess that it is the trinitarian understanding of God that continues to offer companionship and strength for my journey of faith when doubts and fears arise, even if the intricacies of how the Trinity all works remains a mystery. And here I stand in good company.

As I shared in the prelude of my sermon, the Trinity is a bedrock doctrine in the Christian faith. And yet as doctrines go, the trinitarian understanding of God, or the Godhead as it is often referred to, is better understood as a confession of faith rather than as a doctrine. In the classic theology textbook *Faith Seeking Understanding*, Dr. Daniel Migliore explains that "The Christian confession of God as triune is a summary of the description of the witness of Scripture to God's unfathomable love incarnate in Jesus Christ and experienced and celebrated in the community of faith." Migliore contrasts that with the doctrine of the Trinity, which is "the always-inadequate attempt to interpret this witness in the most suitable images and concepts available to the church in a particular era."²

I resonate with Migliore's take on this for a number of reasons. Throughout history scholars and theologians have tried to formulate a statement about how God is manifest through the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, trying on different metaphors and language. Early church patriarchs like Athanasius, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas all worked to communicate the scriptural authority of the understanding of the three-in-one God, from one substance. Scriptures we heard this morning like Genesis 1, where the plural for the Hebrew word for God – *elohim* - is used, where the Gods began to create the heavens and the earth, And in John 1 where we hear that Christ was present at creation. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God."

The historical tensions of the language surrounding the "trinity" led to church leaders being declared heretics and being killed for their understanding. It led to the first split in the church – the Eastern and Western Churches separating over language in the Nicene Creed known as the *filioque*, which in Latin means "and the son." In the 6th century, church leaders in Rome added language to the creed that the Spirit proceeds from the Father **and the Son**, making the Spirit co-equal. Church leaders in Eastern branches of the church rejected the notion of the Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son, rather understanding that both the Spirit and the Son proceed from the Godhead Father. Both branches of the Church were trying to conceptualize in language something that words fail to capture.

¹ <https://speakola.com/grad/stephen-colbert-knox-college-2006>

² Daniel Migliore. *Faith Seeking Understanding*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2004, p67.

Art has done a better job at depicting the Trinity, whether in classic pieces like Botticelli's *The Trinity with Saints Mary Magdalen and John the Baptist*³ which depicts the Holy Trinity as God the Father in heaven, Jesus crucified on the cross and a dove representing Holy Spirit in between them. Or Andrei Rublev's triptych *Trinity*. It is a iconography of the Genesis 18 story of Abraham's three visitors who represented "one God in three persons."⁴ Or the graphic representation from the early Celtic church I shared in the Children's Time or the dancing imagery associated with the mutual indwelling known as perichoresis.⁵

As Migliore notes these are "the always-inadequate attempt to interpret this witness in the most suitable images and concepts available to the church in a particular era." Instead, Migliore encourages a Christian confession of the triune God as "a witness of Scripture to God's unfathomable love incarnate in Jesus Christ and experienced and celebrated in the community of faith." Unfathomable love from God the Father, Creator. Made flesh in Jesus Christ. Experienced and celebrated in the community of faith through the gift of the Holy Spirit given at Pentecost. It may not be something I can easily put into words and express as neatly packaged doctrine. But it is something I can confess as to how I experience fullness of God.

As I reflect back on the sermon I wrote 12 years ago and where I stand today, what rings true to me is the blessing of embracing a mystery for which I cannot explain the mechanism, and yet that I can experience completely. That I can see with my eyes when I look out at all of you passing the peace each Sunday, that I can hear in the laughter and conversation of fellowship time, that I can taste in the meals shared and that I can feel in the hugs and the hands held.

I continue to ponder the mystery of the Trinity, recognizing it is ok to question and doubt and play with imagery. I invite you to do the same. Find what works for you. Maybe God the creator resonates this month with all that is green or maybe it is the winds of Spirit blowing something new into your life for the summer or maybe it is Jesus modeling care for your neighbor. Experience and celebrate God in three persons, blessed trinity as we sang this morning. And be sent to serve by promoting justice, extending compassion, feeding, healing, and caring for all in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Join me in prayer.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pala_delle_Convertite

⁴ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trinity_\(Andrei_Rublev\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trinity_(Andrei_Rublev))

⁵ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/theological-primer-perichoresis/>