



Grace Church

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Rector

JUGGLING THE TRINITY

Sermon for Trinity Sunday, May 31, 2015

Readings: Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 29; Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17

Sermon text: Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

Thank God for small children. They force you to make difficult things simple. This is helpful for big folks too.

A few days ago, I was telling the three and four olds in our preschool chapel about the Trinity. First, I held up my hand and asked, how many fingers? One, two, three, four, five. Five fingers. But only one hand. In something like the same way, God is three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but only one God. Together (clenched fist), one, but also (open hand) many, like one flower with many petals.

Not sure I was getting through, but I pushed on. I took up my three beanbag puffins. A puffin trinity, and here they are (held together up high) in heaven. They all worked together to create the world. The Parent (Father) spoke the Word (Son) through the Breath (Holy Spirit) and all the world was made. Here we are down here, and sometimes we need help. So God came down to live with us in the person of the Son, Jesus Christ. He taught us how to live and forgive and love one another. Then Jesus went back to heaven after being raised from the dead on Easter (there he goes). But we were not left alone. The Father and Son sent the Holy Spirit down (here she comes), to teach and guide and give us power. And so God’s love and life and power moves up and down, back and forth, from and back to God. Like beanbags being juggled—and so I juggled the puffins while the children repeated, “Father, Son and Holy Spirit,” and learned the

new word, “Trinity.”

I know, I am a pathetic juggler (just dropped the Son). But it works for four year olds. For you, maybe a little more to work with.

Consider the image of the Trinity conveyed in the very beginning of the bible, chapter one of Genesis. In the beginning, when there was nothing but void and chaos, God spoke the world into being with a Word (“Let there be light”), while the Spirit hovered over the deep. Here we may understand the Father again as the source or will to create; the Word of creation as the pattern, purpose and plan of creation (in the beginning was the Word, John 1:1); and the Holy Spirit as the breath and power of God, “the giver of life” (Nicene Creed).

Or consider the Trinity this way: as a body, one, with the Father as head and the Son and the Holy Spirit as the right and left hands of God. This is an image from the third century theologian and martyr Irenaeus.

You need two hands to juggle. God needs two hands to work in the world: the objective Word to show us what is truth, to show what it means to be a human fully alive and obedient to the will of God. And a subjective Spirit of Wisdom, to grasp that truth and make it one’s own, to put it into action, and transform the broken world. And together to reconcile the world and the people back to unity with God and each other. This is the plan of God. God intends to include humanity in this dance or conversation of the Trinity.

Next Saturday four of our young people and two adults will join dozens of others at the Cathedral of St John the Divine for confirmation. It will be a wonderful culmination of their period of study—and a new phase in their journey of faith: No longer children, to be told what to believe, but young adults, thinking for themselves, making their own choice to follow Jesus. One of the things they have been asked to do as part of the preparation is to memorize the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer and the Nicene Creed. Sort of Old Testament, New Testament and Church History, in a nutshell. Which I guess is itself a way of Trinitarian thinking.

What I mean is that the Ten Commandments are the center of the Torah, the core of the Old Testament, the revelation of God as one, the source and creator and caring Father of the people and all creation. The Lord’s Prayer, taught by Jesus to his disciples and recalled in two of the Gospels (Matthew and Luke) in slightly different ways, is directed to the Father by the Son. Jesus as the Son and the Word of God shows us how to be fully human, loving and forgiving, and obedient

to the Father's will. The Nicene Creed, hammered out in several contentious church councils in the fourth century after Christ, represents the "one, holy, catholic and apostolic" church's definitive understanding of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Spirit is also Lord and giver of all of life, with a particular role in guiding humanity (speaking through prophets, apostles and sages) and empowering the church (Pentecost). We are bound up together in God's eternal life.

Finally, here is one more way to think about the Trinity: as purpose, presence and power. I will be asking the Vestry and members of the Finance Committee—and anyone else who is interested in being part of a group thinking about a strategic plan for Grace Church which we will convene in the fall—to read a book by Graham Standish called *Becoming a Blessed Church: Forming a Church of Purpose, Presence and Power*. It is all about understanding the church as a community whose decisions are guided by a single question: what is God calling us to do and be? We will look at all our programs and ministries in the light of this question—and in the light of a Trinitarian way of understanding of how God works in the world. This Standish summarizes under the words purpose, presence and power.

Purpose: the will of God, thy will be done, Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, meaning the will of the Father, the purpose and plan of creation.

Presence: the incarnate reality of God, the son, the Word of God.

Power: the Spirit and life of God, filling us and sending us out, giving us courage and wisdom.

These are a few ways to approach, if not understand, the mystery we call the Trinity. What all of the images make clear is this: God works in various ways, through God's purpose, presence and power. And we are part of that plan and drama of salvation. The only question is whether we are willing and intentionally part or unintentionally, even unwilling participants. Prayer is the connection. Scripture teaches us a great deal. Tradition that has handed down generation to generation teaching and examples is a resource. And we blessed to be part of God's mission, even if we sometimes drop the ball. Because we know that Christ has picked us up, and the Spirit is leading us home—to the eternal heart of love. And if God has one name, that is it. Love.

