

Trinity Sunday

Genesis 1:1-2:4a; 2 Corinthians 13:11-13; Matthew 13:11-13

June 11, 2017

Trinity and Iftar

There are 52 Sundays in the year, and only one of them is dedicated to a doctrine of the Church. That doctrine is the Trinity and that Sunday is today. That alone should be enough to challenge any preacher and congregation. If you saw this Sunday coming, and remembered to bring along a sandwich --- or even a pillow -- I don't blame you. It's almost as hard to listen to a sermon about the Trinity as it is to write one. (I nearly fell asleep re-reading this opening paragraph.)

So, I owe you a sermon on the Trinity. Sermons, however, occur in context, and the demands of the liturgical calendar are only part of the picture this morning.

This coming Tuesday night, First Presbyterian will host an event called "The Table of Abraham." Sponsored by the Atlantic Institute, the Table of Abraham is an opportunity for equal numbers of Jews, Muslims, and Christians to sit down together and learn about one another's faith.

Here's the plan for the evening: A speaker from each faith tradition will address an assigned topic. There will be questions and discussion around the tables, and then, as sunset approaches, Imam Ambro Abbass will give a talk about Ramadan. Imam Abbass will keep talking until sunset arrives, and then it will be time for Iftar, the meal that breaks the daily fast.

And just in case you wondered, the Muslims are bringing all the food. It will be kosher, halal, and delicious. I wish all of you could be there, but alas, there is room for only 20 Christians, and the quota has already been filled.

You have probably guessed by now that I've been asked to give the Christian talk. The assigned topic is, "Service to Humanity in Abrahamic Faiths." The idea is to offer an unabashedly Christian squint on the topic, so that's what I'm going to do. What follows is my attempt to address the topic "Service to Humanity in Abrahamic Faiths" *from a Trinitarian perspective.*

(I know I am probably biting off more than I can chew, but to paraphrase Browning, a preacher's reach must exceed his grasp – else what's a heaven for? Here's what I plan to say.

Shalom. Salaam. Peace.

I have the honor to tell you tonight why service to humanity is so important to us Christians. I have chosen to align my remarks with a doctrine that is distinctive to the Christian tradition – a doctrine that, you probably know, is soundly rejected by both Jews and Muslims. I speak of the doctrine of the Trinity – the idea that God is One, and within the Divine Unity are three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Trinity is the conceptual grammar we Christians use to speak about God. More than that, Trinity is the way we experience God in scripture, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and in the ongoing life of the Church.

I speak of Trinity tonight not to provoke offense, but rather to be honest about what those of us in this room do and do not have in common.

I think it's safe to say that all of us gathered here tonight share a commitment to our neighbor, broadly defined. We all believe that God desires us to show compassion and respect toward one another. We all affirm, that in one way or another, we serve God through service to our fellow human beings. The theological and conceptual underpinnings of those commonalities might be similar, but they are not identical. The fact that we have so much in common creates a "safe space" for honesty about our differences.

So, using Trinitarian grammar, let me tell you why service to humanity is so important.

First, we Christians know God as Father, the Creator of the world and everything in it. God the Father is revealed in many places in our scriptures, but especially in the stories of creation found in the Book of Genesis, one of which we read just last Sunday in worship. In that first story, after creating the heavens, the earth, and living creatures of every kind, God creates humankind in God's own image. The New Revised Standard Version of the Christian Bible reads:

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them. Male and female he created them . . .

To claim God as Father in the Trinitarian sense is to affirm that all people are created in the image of God. All people – of every race, every nation, and every faith.

It follows that to know God as Father is to be committed to the welfare of all human beings – not just those who look like us, or speak like us, or belong to our tribe. Not just those who obey our laws and customs. Not just those who want to put America first. And, I should add, not just “people of the Book,” that is, those of us in the Abrahamic faiths.

In the second creation story in the Book of Genesis we learn another important lesson about God the Father: God made us to live not in isolation from one another, but in community with one another. **“It is not good that the man (the *adam*) should be alone,”** God says. **“I will make him a helper as his partner.”**

(I won’t take that story any further just now. It involves the naming of a long list of candidates, none of which fits the bill, a deep sleep, a quick operation, and a cry of delight from Adam, **“At last! Here is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.”** A serpent and fig leaves also come into play, but let’s not get into all that just now.)

The point is, you and I are not made to live in splendid isolation. We were created to live in communion with one another. To know God as Father is to strive for human community.

The second person of the Godhead, in Christian grammar, is the Son – that is, Jesus Christ. We Christians believe that Jesus is God’s word made flesh, God’s incarnate Son. Our scriptures tell us that Jesus went out of his way to reach across racial and religious boundaries to show God’s love for the world. According to the Gospels, Jesus touched people who were ritually unclean, conversed with and healed foreigners, welcomed notorious sinners, and taught his disciples that they should be the least of all and the servants of all.

Jesus also enacted the role of prophet, exposing hypocrisies, driving out money-changers in the temple, and calling people to repentance. He embodied what the Latin American bishops famously termed “God’s preferential option for the poor.” He preached that in God’s coming kingdom, the first will be last and the last first.

Perhaps the most powerful lens through which to view Jesus, the second person of the Godhead, comes from the 25th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. There we find a parable about the Last Judgement. The king in the story rewards those who welcomed him when he was a stranger, fed him when he was hungry, gave him water when he was thirsty, clothed him when he was naked, cared for him when he was sick, and visited him when he was in prison.

“When did we do any of this to you?” the righteous want to know.

“Truly I tell you,” comes the reply, **“Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”**

We Christians believe that when we care for **“the least of these,”** -- the poor, the violated, the hungry, the outcast, the stranger, the immigrant, the prisoner – we are ministering to Jesus Christ himself. In other words, God is somehow present in the suffering of others, and to serve them is to serve God.

Conversely, when we fail to show hospitality to strangers, when we fail to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the imprisoned, and, I would add, provide health care to the working poor, we fail to serve the Son of God, who is somehow present in those neighbors. This is why President Trump’s assault on the Affordable Healthcare Act is so deeply troubling and so contrary to the heart of Christianity.

The third person of the Godhead in Trinitarian grammar is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit, we believe, can be seen throughout scripture and experience. The Spirit the divine *“breath” (ruach)* which broods over the watery chaos in the opening verses of Genesis. The Spirit is the power that emboldens the prophets of old to cry, **“Thus says the Lord . . .”** The Spirit is the **“still small voice”** that keeps the faithful from losing heart.

The Holy Spirit is also the person within the Godhead who enlivens the church to carry out God’s work in the world. The Spirit goes ahead of us, preparing the way. We Christians used to think of Christian mission as bringing God to those who do not know God. There is something profoundly inadequate about that way of thinking.

We don’t *bring* God to others. We *meet* God who, by the Holy Spirit, is already present in others and at work in the world. For instance, we believe that the Holy Spirit was at work in the Civil Rights Movement, and is at work now in ongoing efforts for social justice and racial reconciliation. We believe that the Spirit still inspires ordinary people to speak the truth to power and to pursue God’s vision of peace, justice, and love.

The Spirit is free. Like the wind, it blows where it will, and its range is not limited to the Christian Church. Wherever walls of hostility are broken down, wherever

humans are working together for good, wherever eyes are opened to behold the image of God in our fellow human beings, there the Holy Spirit is active.

More than that, when believe that when we pray, the Holy Spirit intercedes for us **“with sighs too deep for words.”** Even in moments of deep despair, we are not alone. The God who claims us out of pure love will never let us go.

I have barely scratched the surface of Trinitarian theology, but I hope you have gained at least some insight into what makes Christians tick. I want to make one last point about what motivates Christians – or a least the Christians I hang round with – to serve humanity.

We do it not out of fear of punishment or to earn our way into heaven. We do it in response to the love and grace revealed in the Triune God. The key words in the lexicon of our faith are “grace” and “gratitude.” Because we have experienced God’s unmerited grace in Jesus Christ, we are motivated to serve God in others simply because we are grateful. It’s not fear or guilt that motivates our service to humanity. Service is our response to the gracious and loving God whom we know as “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

Or, to quote the First Letter of John, **“We love because he first loved us.”**

Let me conclude with the quintessential Trinitarian benediction which comes from the Letter of Paul to the church in Corinth:

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

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Well, that’s what I plan to say this Tuesday night before the sun sets and the Iftar meal begins. I wish you all could be there. After all, this congregation is the embodiment of the doctrine of the Trinity. If you can’t be there in person, please pray that the Triune God will indeed bless us as we break bread together.

