

"THE TRINITY"
Romans 8:12-17
Sermon preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, May 31, 2015

A lot of intelligent people have a lot of differing notions about God: some don't believe in God, others aren't sure, and those who do believe don't always agree on who God is.

And then there is the Christian belief:
"I believe in God the Father Almighty...and in Jesus Christ His only Son Our Lord...I believe in the Holy Ghost."

The trinity is the uniquely Christian answer to the question, "**Who is God?**"

But you can't explain let alone understand the Trinity because it's a mystery.

In the fifth century St. Augustine, while puzzling over the Trinity, was walking along the beach when he saw a boy with a bucket running back and forth pouring water in a little hole he dug.

Augustine asked, "**What are you doing?**" The boy replied, "**I'm trying to put that ocean into this hole.**"

Right then and there Augustine realized he was trying to put an infinite God into his finite mind.

You get the picture. The Trinity is beyond our comprehension.

But when you think about it doesn't that make sense?

Who can understand God?

The truth is you can't unravel the mystery of the Trinity but you can experience the Trinity by entering into the mystery of three persons in one God.

But first, where does this doctrine or teaching of the Trinity come from?

The scriptures.

The Church Fathers didn't invent the concept out of thin air. The basis for this uniquely Christian teaching is found in one of the oldest creeds of the faith found in Deuteronomy. "**Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one.**" (Deuteronomy 6:4)

Centuries earlier when the Hebrews were liberated from bondage in Egypt they were also liberated from the influence of Egyptian religions professing multiple gods. The historical fact that

the tiny insignificant tribes of Israel were singled out for this unique knowledge is in itself a mystery, giving rise to the doggerel, "**How odd of God to choose the Jews.**" But for whatever reason, the Jews were chosen to receive the revelation of the one true God.

Remember the first commandment? "**I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other Gods before me.**" (Exodus 20:2) The Hebrews were given the choice to turn away from pagan beliefs or be embraced by the One True God who liberated them from anything keeping them from enjoying the God who saved them from spiritual bondage.

But how do we make the jump from One True God to the Three-in-one God?

To get a grasp of this unfolding revelation let's try to see it from the perspective of one of those closest to Jesus. Peter was a child of the Hebrew faith. He was taught the Lord is One. But then Peter met Jesus. He travelled with him, heard him preach, and watched him heal. Then one day Peter was the first of many to make a profound discovery and as quickly as it came to him he spontaneously blurted out, "**You are the Christ, the son of the living God.**" (Matthew 16:16)

Suddenly Peter realized Jesus is the Son of the living God. And then on the day of Pentecost, Peter made another profound discovery. The Holy Spirit comes in a new but the same divine presence Peter sensed in Jesus.

Even so, Luke does not report in his Book of the Acts of the Apostles that Peter declared, "**The Trinity is here,**" and yet the reality of that experience was so overpowering that years later Matthew concluded his gospel with Jesus' parting words, "**Make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.**" (Matthew 28:19)

According to all four gospels Jesus himself first used the formula **FATHER, SON, and HOLY SPIRIT**. Often he referred to God as his father. Then in the Upper Room Jesus promised his disciples soon after his departure the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, would come to be with them.

Years later, as the Church identified each person of the Trinity, that's when the all questions and the controversies arose. So, the Church Fathers, bishops and theologians, counseled together many times until finally they came up with the best explanation humanly possible.

They started with reaffirming the oneness of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. All three share the same being. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, all one in the same God revealing himself through three distinct personalities.

And I say "**himself**" knowing full well God is not a male let alone a man. Even our language is woefully inadequate whenever we try to explain or describe the nature of God.

Another inadequacy in our language is found in the usage of the formula three persons in one God. Our English word person means an individual who can think and feel. I'm a person. You're a person. But the Church never meant to say God is three individual people mysteriously combined into one.

So, for better or for worse the Church Fathers used the Latin word *persona* for mask or character that comes from the Theatre. Back then actors didn't wear costumes on stage. Instead an actor wore a *persona* or a mask to reveal his character. Often, one actor would play multiple roles and wear multiple masks or *personas*.

The mask wasn't to hide the actor but to reveal the actor's role. So when the Church Fathers tried to say something about God's nature they were saying One God revealing himself in three coequal personalities. One God coming separately yet paradoxically simultaneously as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. One God who made us, who saves us, who sustains us unified into One.

Again, I cannot say this enough, all these explanations are imperfect metaphors pointing to the unfathomable mystery of God. But, and here's the Good News, our salvation is not dependent on us solving the mystery. When all is said and done what we know is secondary. What is primary is that God knows and understands us.

It's also good to know Jesus invites and encourages us to enter into the mystery of the Trinity. Which now brings us to the final and critical point of the sermon.

So far I've been trying to explain Church doctrines or teachings about the Trinity. These teachings, based on the Church's interpretations of the scriptures, have stood the test of time. Don't think for one minute the Church immediately agreed on the teachings about the Trinity and automatically rubber stamped them. There were long debates during the first five hundred years of Christianity over these things.

One more thing: doctrines can become mired in academic jargon because theologian scholars tend to write books for each other not the average Christian sitting in the pew. I've come to realize how ironic it is that too many Christians are excluded from understanding what these scholars write, while a five year old child could understand everything Jesus taught.

That's why I don't want any of you to leave here thinking, "He said it well, (or maybe not well at all) but I still don't understand how this Trinity stuff has anything to do with me. I mean how does all this talk about three persons in one God get me any closer to God in ways that really count."

If that's your question I hope I can suggest a way to help you experience the Trinity in a very personal life-affirming way.

You've heard me say countless times Christianity, in essence, is all about the quality of the relationships you forge in life between God, your neighbor and yourself. Jesus himself declared the greatest commandment is to love God, your neighbor and yourself. It's all about entering into committed, loving relationships that last into eternity.

Well, the Trinity is the relationship between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. A perfect dynamic, cohesive relationship based on unconditional love between the Father, the Son and the Holy. As it reads in 1 John, "God is love."

Now here's where the doctrine of the Trinity starts becoming accessible and life affirming, even if you don't have a PHD in Theology: When Jesus came in the flesh he came down to us with the open invitation to enter into this dynamic, loving cohesive relationship between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In other words Jesus came offering eternal friendship with God. You see, it is all about the quality of our relationships and friendship with God guarantees the quality of all our relationships.

On the mornings I'm with our A+ students before we walk them up to Pleasant Plains Elementary School we have a Bible lesson and prayer. One of the unison prayers we recite is the Gloria Patri.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

Every once in a while I try to teach them what I just told you. God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, who love each other unconditionally, invites us to be loved by God through Jesus. Do they understand it? Maybe more than I think they do, but even if they don't, it doesn't really matter because what's really important is God understands us. That's why we are able to sing:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow.

Praise Him all creatures here below.

Praise Him all ye heavenly host.

Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

Do I understand it? I'm not sure. But I believe it.

Amen.