



SERMONS THAT WORK

Trinity Sunday (C)

You Are Three, We Are Three

[RCL] Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; Psalm 8 or Canticle 13 (or Canticle 2); Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15

In 1804, Thomas Jefferson had already drafted the Declaration of Independence, built Monticello, and was nearly halfway through his presidency, but in that year, he decided to take on his most ambitious project of all: President Thomas Jefferson decided to rewrite the New Testament! Well, not rewrite exactly — he didn't want to add anything, just remove all the stuff that didn't make sense. There were inconsistencies, implausible stories, and most of all, there was all that confusing stuff about God being Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

For Jefferson, an Enlightenment-era intellectual who was president, not only of the United States but also of the American Philosophical Society, the Trinity just didn't make sense — how could one God exist in three persons? It was, he might have said, a simple matter of addition: you could be one being or three beings, but not both at the same time!

And this is not an uncommon response to the Christian worship of a Triune God. The Trinity is illogical, it's unmathematical, so why don't we just straighten it out once and for all? We could go back to the religious drawing board and proclaim ourselves absolute adherents to the singleness of God, *or* we could throw in the monotheistic towel and embrace a great plurality of gods — either way makes good sense. Aren't we just creating unnecessary confusion by sticking with this poorly constructed math problem? The problem here is that Christianity is not an equation or a theorem: Christianity is the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

“In the beginning,” wrote St. John, “was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the word was God,” and the world said, “Wait, what? What do you mean the Word was *with* God *and* the Word *was* God? Which is it?” But rather than clarifying this doozy of an introduction, John goes on to tell us that this very same Word of God — the One who is both distinct from God and who is God — took flesh as a tiny, helpless baby in middle-of-nowhere Palestine. That God the Son was the loving friend of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, that the Word of God himself died on a cross, and in so doing, destroyed death itself.

And if that weren't complicated enough, we also have to wrestle with today's Gospel in which Christ speaks of the Holy Spirit. This is the life-breath of God, the active love of God, and yet Jesus doesn't call

the Spirit “it,” as though speaking of an energy, an activity, or a force. Instead, Jesus says of the Holy Spirit, “*He* will guide you into all the truth.” This is the same Spirit of God whom we see hovering over the waters of creation in Genesis, transforming judges and prophets in the Old Testament, the Spirit who, St. Paul tells us, can be grieved by our actions, who speaks in the hearts of his faithful people, teaching us to pray, and coming alongside us as advocate and guide.

What do we make of all of this? What do we make of the Father, the source of all that is, spoken of, not as a theory about why there is something instead of nothing, but as a person who loves each of us infinitely, who grieves with us over our smallest worries, who numbers every hair upon our heads? What do we make of the Word of God, who is not an inspiring message or an important set of instructions, but a person who gives himself to us in his incarnation and gave his life for us on the Cross? What do we make of the Holy Spirit, who is not the Star Wars force, or a warm fuzzy, but a person, who takes up his abode in our hearts; who offers to make our lives living signs of his goodness and love? We are sometimes tempted to think of the Holy Trinity as a piece of technical theology, or the misguided math of a primitive age, but in fact, the belief in one God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is the living heart of the Bible’s revelation of God.

And yet, what impact does faith in the Trinity have on our lives? Isn’t it something we can reflect upon one Sunday a year and then safely shut back in the catechism where it belongs? We often confuse knowing and knowing; if I say to you, “You know Joe Biden, right?” You’ll say, “Of course, he’s the president!” But if I then say, “Can you text him and let him know that I won’t make it to the White House for dinner tonight?” You’ll realize that I didn’t mean, “Do you know about him?” but, “Do you *know* him, do you have a relationship with him, are you pals?”

We sometimes imagine that the doctrine of the Trinity is useful for knowing *about* God, as though it were necessary to get the facts straight, but understating the Trinity is not about holding the correct opinion on God’s nature. Instead, it is the starting place for truly *knowing* him. To believe in abstract forces, explanatory hypotheses, or good or bad math problems, is to hold a set of opinions on the truth; but to come into relationship with God the Holy Spirit, to feel him praying in your heart, to feel him pulling you up into a life of ever-increasing selflessness and joy, this is to begin to build a real friendship with God.

To know the love of Jesus, fully God and fully human, to see how much God incarnate cares for you, to feel the living Word of God walking with you, helping you to transcend all that keeps you from living a life of love for God and neighbor, this is to begin to fall in love with God. To worship our Heavenly Father, to know that we now stand, not as infinitesimally unimportant myriads of mortals, but as his beloved children, as coheirs of his Heavenly Kingdom: as the beloved creatures to whom he gives all that he has, this is to truly know God the Father.

The Eastern Orthodox Bishop Kallistos Ware tells an old Eastern European story about a bishop of a large diocese who decided to visit every single one of his parishes. After spending years on horseback, he thought that he had seen them all, when someone told him about a tiny chapel, on a remote island in the sea. Faithful to his mission, he chartered a boat and set out for the island. Upon landing, he found it to be

a desolate spot, inhabited only by three old men. He greeted them and began to question these isolated Christians about the orthodoxy of their faith. “Tell me,” said the bishop, “how do you pray?” They replied, “We simply stand, holding hands like this.” And the three old men clasped their hands together, saying, “You are three, we are three, have mercy upon us.”

“What?” said the bishop. “This will never do. Don’t you know the Lord’s Prayer?” “No,” said the hermits, “Please teach us, O holy man of God!” The bishop spent all afternoon teaching the absent-minded old hermits the Lord’s Prayer, and when they had finally gotten it, he said his goodbyes, returned to the boat, and headed back out to sea, puzzling over these odd, old men and their island.

It grew dark as he mused on the deck of his boat, looking out over the sea, when from far away he began to see a tiny point of light coming from the island. As it drew nearer, the light grew brighter and brighter, until he could see that it was the three hermits, holding hands, running swiftly on top of the water, beards flying in the wind, their faces radiant with the light of Christ. “O holy man of God, holy man of God!” said the hermits, “We have forgotten the prayer you taught us! Please teach us again so that we may pray rightly!” “On second thought,” said the bishop, “I think that your prayer must be fine.”

You are three, we are three, have mercy upon us. To the holy and undivided Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, be honor and glory, now and forever. Amen.

Fr. Bertie Pearson serves as Rector of Grace Episcopal Church in Georgetown, Texas, and as Dean of the Austin Area Convocation of Clergy. He also produces the popular podcast The History of Christianity with Bertie Pearson. This podcast is an exploration of the ideas and themes which continue to shape the Christian faith, and is available on Spotify, iTunes, and wherever fine podcasts are distributed. Before his current parish, Bertie served both Spanish and English-language churches in Austin and San Francisco, played drums in the band Poolside, and toured as a DJ. He now lives a much more sedate life with his wife, Dr. Rabel Pearson, their two children, a small room full of dusty records, and a very goodhearted Australian Shepard named Ida.