

SERMON- Trinity Sunday (A)

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Genesis 1:1-2:4a

2 Corinthians 13:11-13

Matthew 28:16-20

St. Timothy's (Herndon)

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Psalms 8

OPENING:

Last week, a parishioner complimented me—in the receiving line heading out of church—on my sermon that Pentecost Sunday comparing Rite I and Rite II. She then said that she was looking forward to this Sunday, Trinity Sunday, because she did not quite understand the Trinity and was looking forward to hearing an explanation from me on it.

God willing, I can do exactly that, in the next ten minutes, but I hope, more than explaining it to you, I can explain why it matters, and why it's important.

The Trinity *matters* because that is how God has chosen to reveal Godself. So, we can't "understand" (quote unquote) who God is without an understanding of what the Trinity is.

Now I shouldn't really say "understand" because that implies total mastery of the subject, and should not say "appreciate" because that implies that it's only marginally important.

So I maybe should say: "we need to 'contemplate' the mystery/ the paradox/ the 'incomprehensibility' (as it's written on the back of your bulletin) of the Trinity" because it reveals that God is always engaged in creation, always seeking relationship, because even within Godself, that's what's God is doing.

And, if you lose the Trinity, you usually start to think about Jesus as a nice man who did good things, and then you lose Jesus' divinity, and then you usually lose the Holy Spirit as well. And that means you are left with God the Father. Which... "ain't nothing!" You are still monotheistic and you might be a Unitarian.

And... I would not go so far as the Athanasian Creed on the back of your bulletin which says that if you don't maintain the doctrine of the Trinity that "without doubt (you) shall perish everlastingly" but those are the stakes that have been set up.

The good news is that the Trinity is revealed to us, in the same way that God is revealed to us. Not in academic theory... but through place and time.

Let's look at a couple of those this morning using that Creed and our ongoing investigation into our Prayer Book, Rite I and Rite II, as our guides.

PLACE

First, place.

It was in what is today Greece that the ‘understanding’ of the Trinity was first enumerated in the great councils of the Church in the 4th Century.

Bishop Athanasius, from where we get the name of this creed on the back, was involved in some of those of Councils, including the Council of Nicaea from where we get the Nicene Creed.

It was in that murky place, of flesh and blood, argument and counter-argument—with Greek philosophy swirling over here, and the old-enemy paganism right there, and all the different Christian heresies (coming out of the Middle East and North Africa)—all competing amongst each other in the early Church.

From that we get the “Trinitarian” understanding of our faith

People like Athanasius “won” that argument such that the official Church teaching is set down in the incredibly full detail in things like what is printed on the back of your bulletin.

It is in our Prayer Book, but we don’t say it because it is oh so very long, even goes on to next page. I encourage you to read it (not now!) because it drills down on what the Trinity is.

Now, the connection between “belief in the Trinity” and “going to Hell” makes me, at least, uncomfortable. Which is why we don’t say it anymore. But it’s certainly thorough, you got to give it credit for that.

Athanasius’ nickname was *Athanasius contra mundum* “Athanasius against the world.” Those battles might seem dusty from our perspective but... remember the parishioner’s story I told last week about the prayer book, you could say the same about the Trinity: “Men lost their lives over this, honor them.”

So, it *should* matter, if someone were to say that Jesus was merely a nice guy who said wise things, someone whom we should emulate but is not God.

And, it *should* matter, if someone were to suggest that we are polytheist, tritheists, to say that we worship more than one God.

In response, one does not have to respond with damnation to “everlasting fire” but one could share the image on the front as helpful and the reminder, again, of why it matters.

TIME:

So PLACE, and now TIME.

It was in the 10th century *Anno Domini* that Trinity Sunday was first instituted by Bishop Stephen of Liège (modern-day Belgium) and it spread quickly in Northern

Europe.

The Papacy, the Roman Catholic Church, resisted it for a long time, not keen on introducing a new feast, especially one that was not based on an historical event and because every Sunday, the thinking went, was a festival in honor of the Trinity. It was, finally, made a Feast throughout the church in 1334 by Pope John XXII and it owes its popularity in England to Thomas à Beckett.¹

That made it a NEW Feast in the Church although it's now over a thousand years old. To emphasize its importance, we started dating the Sundays in Ordinary Time as "After Trinity." Or at least we did in the old Prayer Book. In the new Prayer Book (1979) we changed it and started dating Sundays in Ordinary Time from the Feast of Pentecost. That was actually going back to the "old" way of doing it, so before c. 1000 A.D.²

This reminds me how we talked last week, about how God is always up to something new, even when that thing is very old.

Confused?

Again, why does it matter?

First, it matters because either way, we think Pentecost and the Trinity are important to date things from.

Second, "those that date the Sundays after the Pentecost suggest the long period of the historic Church's life under the guidance of the Holy Spirit until the final advent when time shall be no more." VERSUS "those that date the Sunday after Trinity imply a season of instruction and discipline... in which the implications of the historic revelation of Father, Son and Holy Spirit are studied and applied to the Church's inner life and outer witness."³

CONCLUSION:

If that's enough, Trinity Sunday has some of the best hymns in our hymnody.

And we already brought out the big guns in the lectionary, we get what seems like all of Genesis but is really only one chapter and a bit. The lectionary here is doubling down on the idea that the Trinity is not a Christian invention, but rather has been hardwired into the people of God since the very beginning.

We get the ending of Matthew, the great Commission, we got the Athanasian Creed and this cool image on the front.

¹ Shepherd, Massey. 1944. *The Oxford American Prayer Book Commentary*, New York: Oxford, 15-16

² Shepherd, 186.

³ Shepherd, 186.

We are also going to pray the Exhortation.

The Exhortation is an ancient prayer used by the Church, usually done to remind the congregation about the seriousness of receiving communion.

It used to be said all the time, the first prayer books would have said it each week before the Confession every Sunday.

By 1892, remember that prayer book, it was down to being used only once a month.

By 1928, the old prayer book, it was just three times a year: 1st Sunday in Lent, the 1st Sunday in Advent and... you guessed it... Trinity Sunday.

In our current prayer book, it sits there on page 316 but it's not required to be used.⁴

We are going to say it, or I am. I am going to exhort you. It's going to sound a little strange, a little Ash Wednesday, definitely a little Rite I and a little Medieval.

We will say it this morning because the things therein are true, we do need to be more penitential, we do need to take communion seriously, and examine our lives.

But we will also say because it will mark off the important of Trinity Sunday and why it matters. To elevate what we do this week and every week as the basis of our being.

The Trinity *matters* because: We are created, redeemed and sustained by this Trinitarian God who does all these things in action, not in theory.

“In the Trinity, God refuses to be trapped in God's divinity; God is relentlessly relational, incarnational, creative, constantly reaching out and drawing into relationship, as the love of God overflows into every corner of the world.”⁵

AMEN

⁴ Hatchett, Marion J. 1981. *Commentary on the American Prayer Book*. New York: Seabury, 310.

⁵ Willimon, William H. 2016. *Pastor: the Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry*. (Revised Edition) Nashville: Abingdon, 264