

Today we celebrate Trinity Sunday, one of the Principal Feasts of the Church calendar since the twelfth century. It is a day when we turn our attention towards the most mysterious and controversial doctrines of the Christian faith. And it is a day when Rectors across the Church turn to their Curates before they preach and say, “Good luck with this one!”

1600 years ago, St. Augustine of Hippo, one of the most influential and prolific writers in church history, spent years working on his treatise about the Trinity. Legend has it that one day while in the midst of his work, he took a walk on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea in his native North Africa. As he was walking, he noticed a little boy who had dug a hole in the sand and said he was using his seashell to pour water from the sea into his little hole. After watching him for a few more moments, Augustine asked dismissively how the boy could expect such a vast body of water to be contained in such a small hole. The boy was equally dismissive in his reply and asked Augustine how he could expect to contain the vast mystery of God in the words of a book. Then the boy disappeared.

So, if Augustine couldn't capture the essence of the Trinity in a book, I hope you'll forgive me if I don't quite do it justice in this sermon. That being said, let's give it a go shall we?

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity is that there is one God and that God is three Persons--Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Or as the Athanasian Creed, which is conveniently located in the “Historical Documents” section on the back of the Book of Common Prayer says,

“And the Catholic Faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one, the Glory equal, the Majesty co-eternal.”

Now, all of this may be a bit confusing, somewhat intimidating, and perhaps even seem a little gratuitous. But the doctrine of the Trinity is not a theological mind game, invented by humans to trip people up. It comes out of the lived experience of God in the world. It is a way to put words to the belief that the God who created the cosmos and called Israel to be God’s people, is also revealed in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, *and* continues to be with us in a special way since Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension as the Holy Spirit. Even that description, however, comes dangerously close to modalism--one of the many Trinitarian heresies which crop up when you try to explain the Trinity.

[By the way, if you want to learn more about Trinitarian heresies and have a good laugh, I *highly* recommend you go to YouTube and search for “St. Patrick’s Bad Analogies” or check out our Facebook page where we posted it yesterday.]

Anyway... So far we've established that the Trinity is the doctrine that God is Three-in-One--Father, Son, and Holy Spirit--and that attempting to say more than that is very difficult if not impossible and will likely end up in heresy. Well the threat of heresy has never stopped me before! On we go!

It's clear that the readings in today's lectionary are trying to help with this task, as each one points the way for us as we contemplate one of the persons of the Trinity.

The reading from Isaiah and the psalm both point toward the glory, majesty, and holiness of God the Father. Next, the reading from Romans describes how the Spirit of God leads us as children of God, bears witness with us when we cry "Abba, Father," and enables us to participate in Jesus' death and resurrection and so become joint heirs with Christ. Finally, the gospel from John is the story of Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus from which we read the most famous line in all of scripture, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

This passage not only gives us insight into the nature of the Trinity--that God the Father sent his Son and those who follow him must be born of water and the Spirit. It is also a snapshot of how we relate to that God. This is actually the first episode in a three-part series about Nicodemus that's a kind of subplot within the Gospel of John. In this first episode, Nicodemus comes at night to meet Jesus because he's afraid, as a leader of

the Jews, to be seen with this upstart prophet. He questions Jesus but is definitely intrigued by him at the same time. The next time Nicodemus shows up in John is in chapter seven when the Temple leaders are discussing whether to arrest Jesus. Nicodemus defends Jesus saying, “Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?” The third and final of the Nicodemus cameos comes after the Jesus has been crucified, when Nicodemus brings one hundred pounds of oil and spices to anoint Jesus’ body before burial.

Nicodemus is an example of how someone can go from fearful intrigue, to cautious support, to deep commitment. At first he was skeptical of Jesus’ message about the Kingdom of God. But in the end he saw the length to which God went to show the world just how much he loves us.

And that is what’s most important about the Trinity--the love that is between and among the three persons is what makes them one. The Father loves the Son who loves the Spirit who loves the Son who loves the Father. It is love that unites the three persons of the Trinity and it is that same love that calls us into deeper relationship with the Trinity.

This is the love that Presiding Bishop Michael Curry was talking about in his royal wedding sermon. “There's power in love,” he said. “There's power in love to help and heal when nothing else can. There's power in love to lift up and liberate when nothing else will. There's power in love to show us the way to live.”

That’s what we must remember about the doctrine of the Trinity, on this feast day and every day of our lives. It is the source, the substance, and

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the support of our lives as children of God. We are called by the Father to live like the Son through the power of the Holy Spirit. In other words, we are called by Love, to Love, with Love.

In the name of the one holy and living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.