



“The Birth of An Idea”

a sermon by Kevin Scott Fleming

Trinity Sunday, May 27, 2018

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

A few years back, when we were just beginning our interfaith effort known as “One God, One Community,” I was in this sanctuary with some of our friends from the Islamic Society of Evansville and Temple Adath B’nai Israel. We had spent the evening introducing the central ideas of Christianity to our Muslim and Jewish partners. We had stressed that we were all descendants of Abraham and people of one God. Our monotheism was common ground that could serve as a foundation for future relationships and shared ministry.

But it wasn’t long before I was being peppered with questions. “How can you say you believe in one God, when you talk about three gods?” “What does it mean when you say God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit?” “Is God one or three?”

Every Trinity Sunday since then, I am aware of how complicated our conversation about God-in-three-persons is, not only to Muslims and Jews, but to most Christians as well. There is an old saying that goes, “If you say too much about the Trinity you’ll end up with heresy.” That’s no great comfort for a preacher or for a believer trying to have a conversation with someone about the Trinity.

So, our task for the morning is to see if we can figure out at least a beginning statement about the Trinity, should we ever find ourselves trying to explain this rather central idea of our faith to someone who is asking questions.

Let's begin by remembering that the Christian faith has not always believed in the Trinity. The early Church had no real understanding or statements about the Trinity until the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. It was then that the Nicene Creed was adopted – a creed that spoke of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. So, for nearly three hundred years, there was no official statement of faith that included the Trinity.

But during those nearly three centuries, the early Church was wrestling with deep questions. The early Church was born in synagogues. It emerged from the monotheism of Judaism. The *shema*, the central statement of Judaism, “Shema Israel, Adonai Elohenu, Adonai Echad” – “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one” – this was the central faith statement of the early Church.

But it was not long before another credal statement emerged. That statement was “Jesus Christ is Lord.” The centrality of Jesus of Nazareth to the early Church needed to be included in the early Church’s statements and “Jesus Christ is Lord” was not only a theological statement, making Jesus equal to God, it was also a political statement, for people were taught that “Caesar is Lord,” and to say that “Jesus is Lord” was to deny Caesar’s authority.

And then, there was Pentecost and the experience of a presence of power that convinced those early believers that God was with them in a new way. God was there to empower them to continue the work Jesus had begun. It was not a power like anything they had experienced before. It was completely different – totally other. It was holy.

Thus it was, from their own experience, that they began speaking about the God they had experienced and known. They sought to articulate the very nature of who God was to them and how God made Godself known to them. They sought to put into words something that seemed to evade being contained in the meager vessel of human language.

But, an idea was born.

When you look through the pages of Scripture, you never find the word *Trinity*. It never appears.

But the beginning of what we would recognize as trinitarian language is present. At the end of Matthew’s gospel, Jesus gives the Great Commission, which includes the instruction, “...go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

In the epistle lesson for the day, Paul tells the Roman Christians, “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ...”.

No one in either Testament ever tries to articulate the Trinity. There are just these moments when we see a glimpse of what we would come to speak of as the Trinity. When we read these passages – and others like them – we are seeing the birth of an idea.

At the heart of this challenge of the Trinity is the very real – and very good – need to talk about God. But whenever we seek to talk about God, we realize that our words are weak and puny things.

Talking about God is like trying to explain the exquisite beauty of a sunset to someone who did not see it. Talking about God is like attempting to describe the wonder of a perfect rose. Talking about God is like going your best to speak of the love you feel for that one in your life that means all the world and more. In those moments – and many others like them – our best and most considered words fall flat.

Still, even though our words can hardly come close to adequately conveying what we want to say, we must keep trying to find newer and better words. We must reflect, prayerfully consider, discuss, debate, and refine the words we use about God. We have the responsibility to continue the work of those who have gone before us to ask the deep questions and search for answers about who God is and who God calls us to be.

The story is told of the little pre-schooler who is given the assignment to draw a picture. The students are allowed to draw anything they want to draw. A little girl goes to work right away, drawing her little heart out, intently taking the assignment to heart. After a while, the teacher approaches the little artist and asks what she is drawing. “I’m drawing a picture of God.” A bit bemused, the teacher said, “But no one knows what God looks like.” Undeterred the little girl looked up and said, “They will when I finish my picture.”

That is the commitment and confidence we must have in our work of talking about God. Even though our words are inadequate, even though our understanding is inadequate, even though our experience is inadequate, we must draw our picture of God and let others begin to understand what we understand and experience for themselves what we have experienced for ourselves.

God is the source of all things – seen and unseen
– known and unknown.

God is the beginning of all that is
and all that was and all that ever will be.

God is the healer of the broken and the restorer of the shattered.

God is the hope of the disheartened
and the confidence of the discouraged.

God lifts up the poor
and places in seats of honor the victims of hatred and bigotry.

God is the ground of justice and the light of equity.

God welcomes the refugee and embraces the homeless.

God exalts the humble
and pulls down those puffed up with pride and self-importance.

How do you draw your picture of God and what do others learn from your creation?

At its simplest and most basic, that is what the Doctrine of the Trinity is all about. It is an attempt to speak of who God is. And after all these centuries, it is still fraught with challenges and difficulties and inadequacies. Our words cannot help but fall short. We are attempting to explain the describe the wonder and mystery of God. We are trying to put into words that which is beyond words. We are doing our very best to describe the indescribable and explain the unexplainable.

And though it seems like a fruitless effort, it never really is. Whenever we enter into a time of reflection and contemplation on who God is, we almost always come away from the experience with something new and something more. It is a good and worthy pursuit.

So, celebrate our God -

mysterious and wondrous.

Celebrate our God -

Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of all things seen and unseen.

Celebrate our God -

as vast as the universe and as near as our next breath.

Celebrate our God -

who calls us into being and calls us God's own.

Celebrate our God - one God - three-in-one.

Celebrate the glory of the Trinity. For now and evermore. Amen.



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