

Speaking of God

Matthew 5:43-48; 1 John 3:1-3

sermon digest

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My first experience as a pastor was in a farming community a few miles east of Dallas. My closest friend in the church was Ewell Smith, a deacon and teacher of the men's Bible class. Several years before I knew him, after a tragic accident driving a propane truck which took the life of his brother and left Ewell scarred for life, Ewell adjusted his priorities in life and became a strong leader in the little church. As we worked together on several projects around the church on Saturdays, work chatter often revolved around faith issues. One day he told about his ordination a few years before my time.

The church had a visiting evangelist, a real fireball preacher who had pounded on everyone all week. The last service of the revival meeting was Ewell's ordination. Ewell spoke to the church, admitting that he wasn't educated and didn't know the Bible all that well, but he loved the Lord and would do his best to be a good deacon. The evangelist (Perry Mason style) then cross-examined the candidate before the congregation. His first question (or command) was, "Explain the Trinity!" Ewell replied that he didn't know that he could. He had never understood the Trinity, and if he did, he wasn't sure he could explain it. The humble response evoked an angry lecture from the evangelist. The preacher called for the church to call the service to a halt. The church (all two families) did come to a conclusion but not the one demanded. They decided that they had had enough. They dismissed the visiting preacher to continue his mission of steam cleaning the world and proceeded with Ewell's ordination. At the time, the young pastor (also a seminarian) reassured Ewell that the Trinity exceeded the mental grasp of most seminary professors and that he could be a Christian and a deacon without mastering trinitarian theology. After the story, Ewell asked for my explanation of the Trinity; I assured him that his response was as good as mine.

In the Christian Year, today is Trinity Sunday, the first Sunday after Pentecost. As we follow the story of Jesus from Advent through Lent and Easter and celebrate the Spirit on Pentecost, the Trinity seems to fall into a natural order. But we cannot assume here that we are all on the same trinitarian page, understanding or advocating the Nicene Creed. Pope John XXII designated the first Sunday after Pentecost for the celebration of the Holy Trinity in the early fourteenth century. At the time, Trinitarian orthodoxy was not only assumed by the Church, it was controlled by the Church and denied or modified at the risk of one's life.

Some seven centuries later, Boston University Professor Peter Hawkins (*Christian Century*, May 23-30, 2001, p. 16), writing for Trinity Sunday, chose to address the *problem* rather than the orthodoxy of Trinity. Hawkins was embarrassed with preachers who feel the need (not to mention the terrible burden) to *explain* the Trinity; he ridiculed the ones who bring props to the pulpit like an egg (shell, yoke, white) or an apple (fruit, tree, seed). Hawkins locates the problem with celebrating an *idea* rather than an *event*. Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost are supported by biblical narrative; but the idea of the trinity rests on the Nicene Creed decided by a Council of bishops in 325.

The history is the problem. The long, bloody battles in Christian history have done nothing to endear trinitarian orthodoxy with folks who sincerely want to understand the meaning of Christian faith. When Constantine the Great called for a council of bishops to settle the debate over the divinity of Jesus, the Council of Nicea (325) produced the Nicene Creed that set the direction toward trinitarian orthodoxy for all subsequent centuries. Marcus Borg notes that the Creed clearly placed Jesus on a plane above the emperor: "Within a few years of Nicea, Constantine realized this and became 'Arian,' that is, an advocate of the lesser status of Jesus advocated by Arius. So did his imperial successors for much of the fourth century (*Speaking Christian*, p. 207)." To control orthodoxy, the Theodosian Code (439) specified the death penalty for anyone who denied the Creed. As late as 1553, John Calvin ordered death to Michael Servetus, guilty of unitarian theology. On top of the bloody history before the Reformation, this blight on Protestantism is sufficient reason for many Christians to dismiss trinitarian theology as not only an embarrassment, but an evil.

The real question is how shall we speak of God? Promoting a new movie in an interview with Jon Stewart last week, Morgan Freeman explained the physics of string theory to Stewart. Freeman described the idea of parallel universes on the order of blowing up multiple balloons. As I listened to the famous actor's explanation based on a simple metaphor of balloons, my sermon was still rolling around in my head; and I realized that trinitarian theology and modern physics have something in common—the attempt

to explain matters beyond the normal human capacity to comprehend. As most physicists will quickly explain, string theory is just that—theory not fact; and many still dismiss the whole idea as fantasy.

Is trinitarian theology another religious fantasy, a riddle, a test of one's theological agility? Is it a measure of one's ability to grasp the incomprehensible? In 1963, Bishop John A. T. Robinson in *Honest to God* suggested the abandonment of much of our traditional language about God. He even suggested that we drop the word *God* until we have purged it of all misguided traditions. California Bishop James Pike followed with the judgment that the Holy Trinity is an old bottle which is eventually going to burst and for which we should have no regrets. For his challenge to tradition, Pike was threatened with a heresy trial. After he was censured by fellow bishops, he resigned his office. I recall the day in 1968; Dale Moody brought a copy of *Look Magazine* to class showing Bishops Robinson and Pike celebrating the Eucharist with an article on their heresies. Moody noted that while both bishops rejected trinitarian theology, they invoked the Trinity repeatedly in the Mass. Regardless of theological opinion, trinitarian language was fixed in the liturgy.

One searches in vain for the word *trinity* in the Bible. Obviously the Old Testament contains no reference to God as three. In spite of Augustine's opinion, the plurality of God at creation, "let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness," is just grammar, with no enumeration of deities and certainly not a reflection of the Trinity. Even in the New Testament, invoking Father, Son, and Spirit together in one sentence is rare, and the trinitarian formula for baptism in Matthew 28:19 may have been added to the text long after the Gospel had been written, a reflection of the Nicene controversy.

Let us agree on this Trinity Sunday that the pursuit of heresy and condemnation of people who challenge tradition is far from the good news we celebrate in Christ. We are reminded of the commitment in our "Grace Covenant": "We will live in harmony with one another respecting the diversity of our Christian experience with no expectation that we shall walk in lockstep or wear a theological uniform." Let us confess together that all of us "see in a mirror, dimly." Because of our common ignorance, we ought to be about the business of helping one another rather than drawing battle lines of orthodoxy.

Trinitarian language grows out of the personal experience of God. Although the Trinity is not a simple fact or an obvious biblical doctrine, it is not a ridiculous puzzle or a practical joke passed down from earlier Christian generations. Figures, word pictures, and mental images are necessary tools in attempting to speak of the God we cannot see, hear, or hold. The very instant we speak of God, we are in over our heads. We might do well to adopt Augustine's principle: "We do not speak to exhaust the mystery; we speak to keep from being silent." We can mentally reduce God to our level of comprehension, or we can recognize that true worship always reaches beyond our grasp. The focus of worship is always beyond what and who we are. We are people of faith, not fact. Because we dare to speak of God, we are bound to overreach.

As the New Testament unfolds with the focus of God in Christ and God present in the Spirit, questions of trinitarian speech about God arise without regard for the Nicene Creed. If we struggle with the mathematics of deity, we miss God altogether. So, don't bother to count God. We do not discover, create, or otherwise invent God. God comes to us. The Bible describes a God who wants to be known, the God who reveals God's self in our history, in our experience.

The famous "new atheist" Richard Dawkins charges all religions with creating gods in the human image and explains religion as a natural byproduct of evolutionary human development. With exception to Dawkins' atheism, I am prone to agree with his opinion of our source for god-talk.

In the long human struggle to speak of God, Jews found metaphors in human experience that identified God as the patriarch of creation. They looked in the mirror at self, albeit they, like we, looked in a mirror dimly. Walter Brueggemann has observed that in Genesis the creation of humans in the image of God speaks to the plurality of humankind. Only in relation with others does one express the creative grace of love. Because we do not live in a vacuum of isolation, we know God in the community of faith where God's love is. Why should early Christians not see God in community, in some form of trinity? Early Christians seemed to agree that Jesus taught his disciples to pray "Our Father." The focus in 1 John was on the parental gift of God's love that "we should be called the children of God." Made in the image of God, the human person is more than what we see on the surface. The mystery of God is only a step beyond the mystery we all experience of the human self. The inner-self—the spirit, the soul—is the core of human being beyond the reach of the surgeon's knife. The whole human person is always more than the

sum of the parts. In fact, all humans are somewhat schizophrenic. We transcend the self. We are incomplete without the community and family that surrounds us.

In spite of all of the bad history and without regard for the mumbo-jumbo of Nicene definitions, speaking of God as Father, Son, and Spirit was parallel to the understanding of the human person. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus did not see God as alien to humanity. Rather, he affirmed the high ideal: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." In other words, *be like God* was not a contradiction. Jesus grew up like every Jewish boy with the *Shema Israel* committed to memory, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." The first rule of life for Jews was then and always will be, "no other gods." Jesus lived by the *Shema*. We worship one God. But God has met us in person—in the person of the Son and in the personal presence of God's Spirit.

Forget the math. Trinity is about our experience of the personal God. Trinity is about the most important message that we have about God—God is love. Trinity is about the most important message about you. Made in the divine image, you are capable of that deep spiritual communion with others that identifies you as person. The God who is known in Christ is also known through the love of God's people.