

Speaking of God

sermon digest

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Ephesians 1:2-14

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Barbara Brown Taylor was an Episcopalian priest in northeast Georgia. A well-meaning friend left an envelope on the hood of her car one Trinity Sunday. In the envelope was a Three Musketeers candy bar with a note that read, "All for one and one for three! Happy Trinity!" (*Home by Another Way*, p. 154) I can only imagine the reaction of the bishops who gathered in 325 in Nicea to settle the debate about Christ with the trinitarian formula. "What? A candy-bar picture of God!" But, in respect of the friend, the candy bar is not so far removed from some of the explanations that work their way into Christian pulpits. We have been told that God is like water, which we can experience as liquid, solid, or vapor. Or, considering that this is Father's Day, we have been told that God is like the man of your house—father, husband, and engineer.

One of the more profound statements of the Trinity comes from Augustine in the sixth century. Augustine saw the Trinity in the metaphor of God the lover, reaching out to his beloved Son, bound together in the Spirit of love. He chose to ignore the formula of Nicea in favor of his own experience of God. The Trinity was Lover, the Beloved, and Love itself. With the exception of Paul, Augustine was the most influential theologian of Christian history. For Augustine, God meets us in the experience of faith rather than in the high-toned language of Nicea. The Psalmist (46) identified God with the historical experience of the nation—the God of Jacob; the psalmist came down to the experience of God: "be still and know that I am God."

After more than five decades of pastoral preaching, I still wake up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat over being so presumptuous as to tell you who God is. I have not exhausted the mystery of the closest persons in my life. I am not absolutely certain about the mystery of my own soul. How shall I presume to speak knowingly or glibly of the mystery of God? Perhaps the only thing worse than trying to explain God is to consent passively to someone else's language or to join a conspiracy of silence suggesting a theological vacuum. With some of the great minds who have gone before us, we do not speak to exhaust the mystery of God; we speak to keep from being silent.

Speaking of God is never adequate. No matter how serious or sincere we are about our worship language, no matter how well informed or educated I may be in the history and theology of my faith, no matter how good I am with words and clear in my rhetoric, our language never exhausts the mystery of God. Let us always begin in worship with confession of our ignorance, that we see in a glass darkly, that we neither speak with perfect clarity about what we think we know or know anything in a final way. The offense of the history of trinitarian language comes to rest on the arrogance of the church and the assumption of authority by church leaders and theologians. David Jenkins (*Guide to the Debate about God*, p. 13) tells about a Victorian headmaster of a college in Oxford who embodied authoritarian education; about whom was said: "I am the master of this college, and what I don't know isn't knowledge." Such arrogance can be found in the classroom and science laboratory as well as the church.

The assumption of authority appears in the Old Testament in the "Thus says the Lord" of the Prophets of God. The Hebrew word for prophet *nabi* means one who speaks for another. In case of the Prophets, they were appointed to speak the Word of God to the people. But even in the context of prophetic religion, Jeremiah exposes false prophets who claim to speak for God but whose mouths are full of lies. The prophetic tradition called for discernment, distinguishing the word of God from human arrogance.

We make these judgments every day. A few years ago I was in a church meeting in which the speaker spoke in hushed tones about the instructions of God which had been revealed to her. It seemed that she could not claim any word as something that had originated in her own fallible mind or spoken in her own stammering humanity. She kept telling us what God had told her to say. She was the prophet. Now, I don't think that she was malicious or that she really thought she had the right to speak the very word of God; but claims of direct inspiration seemed to bear more authority and claim absolute attention when one is making a public statement. Such language often resides in pulpits. After awhile, I quietly slipped out of the room. To my surprise I encountered an acquaintance, a professor of philosophy who growled, "I don't think that God speaks to her any more than God speaks

to me in direct, audible language.”

The Crusaders of the Middle Ages, who claimed divine authority for killing Muslims and Orthodox Christians in the name of God, were not listening to the God I know in Christ. The terrorists who claim the will of Allah in their acts of murder toward innocent people do not speak for the God of my faith. The Ku Klux Klan who burned crosses and executed people of color in the name of Christ have not acted in harmony with the Christ of the Gospels. One of the characteristics of global fundamentalism uncovered by Martin Marty was the militant self-assurance that they alone hold the truth.

The Nicene Creed falls short of exhausting the mystery of God. I understand the frustration and repugnance that some hold for trinitarian language in light, or perhaps we should say, *in the shadows*, of history. Bart Ehrman was right: “Jesus did not spend his preaching ministry in Galilee proclaiming that he was the second member of the trinity.” Even the early references to Jesus as the Christ of God were accompanied in the Gospels with what is known as the “messianic secret.” Disciples were advised not to broadcast that he was the Christ of God. Nowhere in the Gospels was the man Jesus addressed as God. Nowhere in the Gospels does Jesus eclipse the Jewish worship of the one God of creation. After the fact, John’s Gospel speaks of “the Word made flesh to dwell among us.” But even in John, Jesus prayed to God and taught his disciples to pray. He taught his disciples to address God as Father, as he addressed God as Father. The word trinity cannot be found anywhere in the Bible, no reference to three persons in one God. Defining God as Trinity was an event in later history that grew out of confusion and conflict over the nature of the Christ: Was Jesus man or god or something in between? The initiative came not from Church authority, but from the Emperor Constantine, who seemed to be more concerned about the unity of the Roman Empire than the language about God.

The formula of Nicea that set a direction for Christianity in 325 CE did not really settle the debate or explain the mystery of God. The idea of one God, one substance, in three persons became the standard of orthodoxy; but it required repeated review and constant explanation. The word *persona* chosen by the Nicene Fathers to distinguish Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, came from the Greek theater. The *persona* was a mask, a face to distinguish the roles of the same actor on stage. The whole debate could have taken Christianity into a totally different direction. Orthodoxy was decided by vote of the Council of Bishops, the first Ecumenical Council in history.

The Nicene Creed has evoked anger and frustration from folks who want simple explanations or who are bothered by descriptions that defy logic. Trinitarian orthodoxy has been used as a club to force conformity of belief in the Church. The execution of Michael Servetus by the authority of John Calvin in 1553 over the rejection of trinitarian theology was an offense to the very God Calvin sought to defend. If God is love, as the Letter of John articulates so beautifully, then acts of violence and persecution in the name of God are both sacrilegious and irrational.

With all questions of orthodoxy aside, can we allow room for Trinitarian faith to be an authentic part of Christian experience? Questions raised in the Gospels for which answers are given as the word of Jesus himself can be assumed to be issues under discussion by the earliest Christians. So in the Fourth Gospel, when Jesus announced his departure to dwell with the Father, and he calls for disciples to “Believe in God, believe also in me,” the inquisitive Thomas pipes up with an expression of uncertainty about where Jesus was going and the way to get there. Philip joined in with the request, “show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” These were not just questions belonging to the fringe; they were the cry for understanding from the church. The word attributed to Jesus was a statement of the unity of the Father and the Son: “I am in the Father, and the Father is in me.”

Trinitarian language grew out of the experience of early Christians. If you want to get to the bottom of the Christian move toward trinitarian language, look to the story of Jesus. The first disciples spoke of God out of their experience with the man Jesus, early Christians of their experience with the eternal Christ. Before Jesus, the questions which led to trinitarian theology were not asked.

The doxology in the salutation of Ephesians is an example of the kind of experience language that is found in early Christianity. Paul called the Ephesians to worship God, “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The church had encountered God in Christ. Paul said it best in 2 Corinthians 5:12: “In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself.” Paul did not say, “Jesus is God.” But after the cross and

resurrection, followers of Jesus, who had experienced the presence of God in the life and work of Jesus, had begun to speak of Jesus as ascended into the very presence of God. The analogy of Father and Son permeated the thinking of early Christians in the Gospels. So Paul writes to the early generation of Christians, calling them to worship the God they had come to know in Christ. Well after Pentecost, the letter was addressed to people “marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit.” Without explanation or philosophical formula, Father, Son, and Spirit emerged naturally in early Christian language about God.

Elizabeth Johnson concludes: “In shorthand, we might say that [early Christians] experienced the saving God in a threefold way as beyond them, with them, and within them, that is, as utterly transcendent, as present historically in the person of Jesus, and as present in the Spirit within their community. These were all encounters with only one God” (*Quest for the Living God*, p 204).

Heinrich Ott (*God*, p. 79) tells a fascinating story about a conversation between the Jewish theologian Martin Buber and the Prime Minister of Israel David ben Gurion. Something of a religious cynic, David ben Gurion asked, “Professor Buber, why do you really believe in God?” Buber responded, “If one could speak only *about* God then I would not believe either. But I believe in God because one can speak *to* him.” The best word for Trinity Sunday comes from a Jew. Being open to the experience of God in prayer is far more important than finding the right theological language for definition.