

SERMON: Church of the Holy Spirit, Wayland, Mass. June 7, 2009

Sermon for June 7, 2008 - Church of the Holy Spirit, Wayland - Rev Judy Gay

TRINITY SUNDAY

Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 29; Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17

CHILDREN'S SERMON:

Tell story of the 6 blind kids, who went to the zoo to see an elephant.

The guards let each one of them get into the pen with the elephant and feel him, but of course the elephant was so amazingly big that each one could only feel one part of the elephant: a leg, the side, an ear, the trunk, an ivory tusk, the tail....

When they got home to their school their schoolmates asked them: What was he like?

*How do you think they answered? ----- **answers about the elephant** -----*

leg - like a tree trunk

side - like a great big soft wall

ear - like a big flat piece of leather.

Trunk - like the end of a garden hose or maybe bigger, like a fireman's hose.

Ivory tusk - like a long piece of hard plastic

tail - like a rope

Sure, each described the part he knew and then they began to argue.....

Who was correct? Nobody had the whole, big picture.

*Maybe we have the same kind of problems when we try to **explain who God is**. Discussion...*

ADULT SERMON:

1. CHALLENGING QUESTIONS

Sometimes, as adults, we have the same kind of problem.

For example, have you ever tried to explain what God is like to someone?

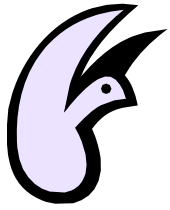
I don't mean just saying the old familiar words, like

"We believe in the Trinity: God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit"

I mean trying to explain what God means to your life, your heart, your mind?

Or trying to answer challenging questions:

- Like my grandson who asked "Where does God live?"
- My Chinese friend who asked me: "Is Jesus God?"
- A Muslim student who asked "Why do you Christians believe in three Gods"



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even though the Bible, like the Koran, say there is only One God?"

For the first half of the Church year, from Christmas to Easter to Pentecost, we have been going Sunday by Sunday through the events of Jesus's life, death and resurrection and then the early days of the Church leading up to the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, last Sunday. And for the second half of the church year, this summer and fall, we will be considering the life and teachings of Jesus and some of the great stories from the Old Testament.

But just today, for one Sunday in the church year, we who were baptized "in the Name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit" stop to consider this central belief of our Christian faith, the Trinity and to raise our voices in praise of God as "three in one and one in three."

2. WHY THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY DEVELOPED

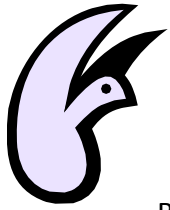
We don't actually find the Doctrine of The Trinity in the Bible, although scripture is full of accounts of the God the creator, incarnate in Jesus, and moving in our hearts as the Holy Spirit. At the end of Matthew Jesus tells his followers to baptize "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." (Mt 28:19) Paul often concluded his letters with a Trinitarian kind of blessing by saying "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (Gal 13:13) The Trinity is always implicit, though rarely explicit.

Although there is no Biblical "Doctrine of the Trinity", yet it is a concept which the early church soon developed to help themselves understand and talk about the God in their evangelism, worship and Christian living:

- Evangelism, because they had to find ways to understand, summarize and remember how to tell the Good News of God and of Jesus and of the Holy Spirit to Jews and to Gentiles, to seekers and to challengers, to their children and to their friends.
- Worship, because when they met for prayer and breaking of bread they began to include memorable phrases and hymns to praise and to call upon God. And
- Christian living, because it was important for those early Christian communities to find unity in shared beliefs, words, and ways to put the Love of God into everyday living.

Gradually Christians formulated and memorized many of the teachings of Jesus as well as the Lord's Prayer, the 10 Commandments, the Apostle's Creed and liturgical phrases stating the underlying concept of the Trinity: One God (who can be called) Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

And so it is that today, in our traditional Episcopal, Catholic and Protestant worship services, our



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Book of Common Prayer and our hymnals, we find frequent mention of God as Trinity and a Trinitarian structure to the Creed we say each Sunday. Just see how often the Trinity is mentioned in our service today, including the hymns we are singing.

3. MODERN ALTERNATIVES TO TRADITIONAL TRINITARIAN WORDS

But actually, in many churches these days, Christians have begun to think that the familiar Trinitarian words are old-fashioned, obsolete, too narrowly patriarchal or just meaningless. Some people, believing that the ancient confessional statements and doctrines are no longer helpful or are actually offensive, seek more modern, inclusive, expansive ways to express the Triune mystery of our God. I confess that I am sometimes one of them.

When I was beginning to study African women and gender issues in England in the 1970's I went to church faithfully but discovered that I didn't feel included when we sang "Rise up, Oh men of God," or "Sons of God, hear his holy word." Then it began to bother me that, although scripture says we are all made in the image of God, our Bible readings and Anglican worship were so full of "he" and "him" and Father and Son. It was a great revelation when I went to Lesotho and began to learn the local language in which there is no distinction between gender in pronouns, so God and Holy Spirit are just "person pronoun" rather than "thing pronoun." I learned a Sesotho blessing for a traveler which says "Molimo a u pepe" meaning "may God carry you safely on her back." Only a woman (or a woman-like-God) can carry a child that way.

In 1989 the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, (NRSV) which you have in your pews, was published – a version which provides more inclusive language translations of scripture. And as I taught Bible in Africa it was exciting for me to begin to discover many feminine images of God in the scriptures.

It was helpful, in 1998, when our Episcopal Church authorized the use of Enriching our Worship with more "inclusive" or "expansive" language versions of some familiar Book of Common Prayer phrases . That's how it happens that in our bulletin today our opening words were:

"Blessed be the one, holy, and living God" rather than the more familiar Prayer Book phrase:
"Blessed be God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.""

That's how come we often have final blessings that speak of
"The Creator, redeemer and sanctifier" or
"The wisdom of God, the Love or God and the Grace of God..." or

“God’s Blessing, Christ’s peace, the Spirit’s outpouring be with you...”

Enriching our Worship even includes meaningful new canticles,

like one by the great 11th century monk, Anselm of Canterbury which begins:

“Jesus, as a mother you gather your people to you”

and another by the 14th century woman mystic, Julian of Norwich in praise of

“Jesus, our true mother,” who came in our poor flesh to share a mother’s care,

...Our true mother, Jesus, bears us for joy and endless life.”

I believe that such “expansive language” to talk about God, does not threaten our traditional understandings, but expands them by adding to the rich resources of imagery and words we can use when we want to express the wonder and love of God Almighty who is indeed “Immortal, Invisible ...hid from our eyes.”

4. TRINITY SUNDAY - A CHANCE TO CONSIDER:

Our knowledge of God is so very limited, like the blind boys’ knowledge of the elephant they touched. So there are times, particularly on days like Trinity Sunday, when we need to be reminded of the whole vast wonder of God implicit in the familiar Trinitarian phrases of our scriptures and hymns and liturgies, but widened by the infinitely greater range of words and concepts through which Christians from every culture and language and period of history have experienced and spoken of God.

When we speak of God as Our Father in the familiar words Jesus taught us, we can add “aba, baba, daddy” and mother, parent, beloved. – intimate words for a God who in other places in the Hebrew Bible was so holy that no one could utter his name or see his face.

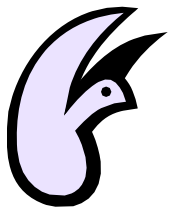
Genesis gives us God as Creator of this incredibly beautiful world around.

In today’s first reading the young priest, Isaiah, saw God at Lord, as King, sitting on a throne in the temple, high and mighty – invoking repentance, offering forgiveness, and sending Isaiah out on mission. And in this tradition we find many Biblical images of God’s Kingly power, worshiped with Imperial pomp and ceremony, and even leading his people in battle as a victorious warrior.

Moses knew God as liberator, lawgiver, guide and provider in the wilderness.

The prophets knew God as judge, guardian, comforter, lover, wisdom, Lord of history.

Such images of God which expand our understanding of Father, the first person of the trinity,



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not only help us to worship and praise God better,
but help us explain God to others,
and call us to live as responsible stewards of creation,
to let justice roll down like waters, and to work for God's peaceable kingdom on earth..

When we speak of the second person of the Trinity, God the Son we know we are speaking of God incarnate in Jesus, visible, here on earth for all to know what God is like. The four Gospels to tell of his life and teachings, together with Acts, the epistles and Revelation to help us understand the meaning of Jesus Christ for our faith and life and witness.

We can meet Jesus in such Biblical ways as the Good Shepherd, the Lamb of God, the Savior, Redeemer, the Healer, the teacher, the Lord, the Word, the Logos.

We can think of the familiar words in our Creeds which try to explain the theological and philosophical nature of Jesus as "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God...of one Being with the Father..."

But we can also expand our concepts to include experiences of Jesus the carpenter, the worker, our brother, our companion on the way...of whom we sing "What a friend we have in Jesus" who "Walks with me and who talks with me, and tells me I am his own."

And we must remember to see Jesus in the people around us, in our neighbors, in each other, for Jesus himself said "In as much as you have done something for the least of these people, you have done it unto me."

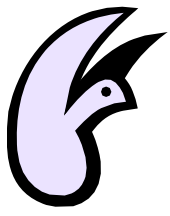
The third person of the Trinity isn't just dying on a cross or blessing children in a Sunday School picture – Jesus is sitting right next to you in church today, and at work tomorrow.

Such images of God which expand our understanding of the second person of the Trinity, not only call us to believe in Jesus and worship him as Lord and tell his Good News to others but call us to walk in his ways, to live the values of the Kingdom of God, now

Finally, when we speak of the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit,

we can think back to the beginning of Genesis which says that the Spirit of God, Ruach, "a wind from God, brooded over the face of the waters." We think of the spirit that inspired the prophets, empowered King David, comforted God's people, and is invoked throughout the Psalms. We read how the Spirit came upon Mary when Jesus was conceived, led Jesus throughout his ministry, and guided the early Christians to spread the Good News to the ends of the earth.

In today's Gospel Jesus says that Nicodemus – and, by implication, all of us – must be born of the Spirit – not a new mystical height of experience but a way of living out the life of God in the world, guided, empowered, enlivened by God's Spirit. The scriptures and the lives of the saints, and the shared experiences of our Christian brothers and sisters sitting around us, all bear



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witness to the work of God's Holy Spirit in our worship, our prayer, our growth in the faith, our companionship with God and with each other in times of joy and sorrow.

Sharing our experiences of God's Holy Spirit can expand our knowledge of the Third person of the Trinity and help us grow in the grace of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The Trinity isn't some kind of abstract theological doctrine, but it is a way to praise God, to tell others about him, and to walk in God's Way all the days of our life.

I hope we can all carry from here today the powerful words our closing hymn by the great 5th century Irish Saint Patrick:

*I bind unto myself the Name, the strong Name of the Trinity,
by invocation of the same, the One in One, and One in Three,
Of whom all nature hath creation, eternal Father, Spirit, Word;
praise to the Lord of my salvation, salvation is of Christ the Lord.*