



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

On Trinity Sunday

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

June 15, 2014

It may not sound like it at first, but the idea and doctrine of the Trinity is really about trying to figure out who and what Jesus is and how he fits into things. From the 2nd century on, theologians struggled with the implications of Jesus as divine. It required a new way of thinking about God. The image of God as a definable super being, ruling and doling out blessings and curses could no longer suffice. The doctrine of the Trinity is the result of much thought, but even today, people still struggle with the idea of God the Three in One. A big problem for many answer seekers was the prevailing understanding of God as unchangeable, all powerful and beyond suffering. How could such a God suffer on the cross? The Trinity causes us to ask, "does God suffer?" I believe that we make God suffer all the time by our treatment of one another and the rest of creation. Along these same lines, if we ask "does God suffer" shouldn't we also ask, does God experience joy? The whole idea of the incarnation, a big part of the Trinity, is God's willingness to encounter humanity in the best way, to experience human suffering but also human joy.

The other most difficult aspect of Trinitarian thinking is the equality part...these three co-equal persons or expressions of God. The Gospels have plenty of instances of Jesus saying things that indicate that he saw himself in a subordinate role to the Father. In the Trinity, equality is an attribute of the God, which could have some profound implications for us and our common life. The Trinity just never gets easy It's as if we don't yet have the language or perspective to fully grasp this mystery. But if it is to be more than just the name of our parish, we should give it a try.

In my first year in seminary, we had to create a genogram. A genogram is a diagram of your family and the relationships therein – kind of like a family tree but with more description. Relationships are connected by lines of different types that indicate depth and importance. Now in my biological family, I have my parents and their families and my sister. I also have a half sister from my mother's second marriage, four step brothers and sisters with whom I was raised from my father's second marriage, and a half sister and half brother from my father's third marriage. My step-mother's family provided an important grandmother figure as well as cousins and aunts and uncles. Then you add in-laws and their cousins that became important in my life and as my children's Godparents. We were given an 8.5x14" piece of paper to do this. I worked and worked just to account for everybody and when it was done it looked like some Etch-a-Sketch gone mad. I handed it in and the teaching assistant glanced at it and did a double take. As she tried to grasp the complexity of my family, she just kept saying "Oh my!"

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The doctrine of the Trinity is the kind of thing that happens when people try to describe God. What starts as a simple point on a piece of white paper that represents an awareness of the existence of something, grows until it starts to resemble my genogram. As soon as you start to ask questions--“Who or what is God?”; “What is God like?”-- you get more and more dots on the paper. Sometimes, when there is more than one answer to a question, i.e. “God is merciful”, or “God is just”, the answers themselves complicate the picture because they appear to contradict each other. A merciful God forgives, but a just God may require something to restore balance which could look like some form of punishment. So which is it? Is God merciful or just or both? Soon you have more dots and lines connecting them, and arrows pointing, and God starts to look like that etch-a-sketch thing.

But seriously, what is the point of these torturous exercises? I believe the point is why we do them. We do them because we want to understand the greatest mystery, to know something about it and to be known by it. C.S. Lewis said, "we are hungry for God... (and) this hunger is better than any other fullness; this poverty better than all other wealth." We seek a knowledge and experience of God because there is nothing else that can truly fill us and provide the answers to the "why" questions. Science may explain how but only faith can attempt to know why. Heaven knows that we will try all sorts of other things before we give God a chance to fill us up and open our hearts and illuminate our minds. But eventually, the more elaborate our diversions, the more dire will be our need for that which only God can give; true love and true connection. The God genogram is really less complicated than we try to make it. The lines of connection between God and every single person are of equal depth and importance. My professor Clark used to refer to God as “the ultimately related one.” Because of God’s relation to us, we have an equal relationship with each other. We may all have different fingerprints and DNA but we all have an identical faith genogram. All of the lines that connect to us are of equal strength and there are a lot of them, one for every person on earth. The lines between us and those people we do not know personally go through God and they are as strong as those that connect us to the person we love the most.

The clearest way for me to grasp the concept of the Trinity is as relationship. The Trinity exists as a community of equal relationships – God and Christ and the relationship within this divine diversity. The lines of the genogram themselves – the relationships – are also God. One formula that expresses this beautifully is the triune God as Love, Lover and the Loving. Today's short reading from 2 Corinthians says something similar. God is love, Christ is grace and the Holy Spirit is communion. It is the mysterious substance so beautiful that it makes me want to weep.

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The hunger to know God becomes strong in turbulent times. In her book *Amazing Grace; A Dictionary of Faith*, Kathleen Norris said this about the Trinity especially when we are faced with issues of survival on this earth. This is what she says: “Tension is a creative force. But polarization, which seems an abiding sin of our age, is worse than useless. It stifles creativity, whereas a healthy dose of negative capability, the ability to hold differences in tension while both affirming and denying them, enlivens both poetry and theology. In Christian history, it has sometimes meant the difference between unity and schism, offering a synthesis that provides a third way. Mystics of many religious traditions have often spoken in terms of threes, and although I have very little grasp of how science is done, I love to read about quarks, those subatomic particles that exist in threes. There is no such thing as one quark, but only three interdependent beings; I picture them dancing together at the heart of things, part of the atomic glue that holds this world together, and to the atomic scientist, at least, makes all things on earth more alike than different.

If the idea of the Trinity can help us find a way to look for our similarities before our difference, then it is a most useful doctrine direction. It can be increasingly relevant as we seek to understand the physical structure of the universe and how to live together on this troubled earth. Anything that we can do to further and to heal our vast network of relationships is holy work. – God, the ultimately related One, creates the relationships and then lives the example in perfect unity. We cannot will away relationships simply because they trouble us – we can only strive to be authentic and to live with honesty and love and compassion. When we do that, even if we are not completely successful, the mysterious and mystical and miraculous ways of God are will do more than we can ask or imagine.

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