

"The Wonder at the Heart of Christianity"

Pastor Mary Robinson-Mohr

Genesis 1:1-2:4a; Matthew 28:16-20

Trinity Sunday, May 18th, 2008

Not too long ago I was trudging through the vast Atlanta airport on my way to a meeting. I came to one especially long corridor with those automated walkways, one that connected one large section of the airport to another. In between the long moving walkways was a type of median, if you will, that had a wonderful display of artwork. What a relief to have something interesting and thought-provoking to see in the midst of that ocean of Delta Airlines jets and scrambling harried travelers. The display showcased the work of an artist who had imported large stone boulders from a part of Africa, and had carved statues out of this stone with distinctly African American features.

Well, this livened up an otherwise drab hallway. The sculptures were beautifully done, and faces and hands appeared out of obvious blocks of stone. They were quite captivating. Some of the stones appeared at first not to have been touched, and they kept their natural shape and patina. They appeared to be just plain old big boulders sitting in the airport. But then upon closer viewing, shapes and faces appeared out of the natural stone. One sculpture in particular caught my interest. It was named "The Family," and it was one block of stone standing about six feet tall. The figure of a woman had been tapped into one side, and a man on the other. Their arms encircled one another, and their faces met at the top in a type of arch pattern. Between them and under their protection were braided the figures of three children, looking very much to be in motion even though they were held in stone. It was a beautiful picture of the intimacy and nurturing and support that one ideally thinks of when one thinks of a family.

I thought of that statue as I formed my thoughts for the service today. Our liturgical church calendars say that today is Trinity Sunday. It is a day when we remember and celebrate our God as one God in three persons. Last Sunday was Pentecost Sunday, a day when we gave thanks for the presence of the Holy Spirit among believers. Trinity Sunday then comes along as if to say, "There now! We've reviewed the history and formation of the Church, and we have had God the Creator and Father from the beginning, then we've had Jesus Christ our Redeemer and the Son beginning at Christmas, and finally we have the bestowal of the Holy Spirit our Sustainer at Pentecost. Let us remember that we have one God in three persons."

Our lectionary Scriptures do their best to help us understand this rather complicated doctrine. This is harder than one might think, because our doctrine of the Trinity is **not** clearly spelled out in the Scriptures. It was distilled from the Scriptures, as well as from the faith experience of the early Church. The early Church was hard pressed to describe how Jesus was not a second god to the Creator God of Judaism, yet was of the same

substance of God and deserving of our worship and allegiance. Then the first Christians were hard pressed to describe how they firmly knew that Jesus still walked with them, how God could still be right beside them, by way of the presence of the Holy Spirit. Just how do you put these things into human concepts and words? There really isn't anything else in our realm of understanding that comes close to being like our God.

So today we hear of the first Creation account in Genesis, and we hear how the Spirit or wind of God hovers over the waters as God the Creator calls aspects of our universe into being. Then we hear that God creates humanity "in our image," and while there is only one God creating the world, there is this distinctly plural pronoun, "our," used by God to describe how humanity will reflect the image of God. One, yet more than one.

Then we come to our Gospel lesson. It is called the Great Commission, because Jesus gives marching orders to his remaining disciples. When he tells them to go out into the entire world to make many more disciples, he commands that they baptize new believers "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

This whole idea of the Trinity is fascinating. No other faith has anything quite like it. We often hear or say that all the great religions of the world worship the same God, and to a point that is a very helpful idea. There is much in common in the world's religions that is ignored. Too often the differences in the religions are played up, often with disastrous and even violent results. But there is an important difference with Christianity, and that is our understanding of the Trinity. So when Christians speak of God, we can't speak of "God" without understanding that the one God is also three distinct persons. "God" for Christians encompasses God in heaven, seeing all and knowing all, God walking on earth in a very human way, and God still walking with us here on earth.

The Trinity has been called a "treasured breakthrough in the church's thinking." Many Christian leaders have struggled to articulate just how God is one yet three. Most take the formula for baptism as the best way to describe this: God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Others have described the Trinity according to the functions of each person of the Trinity: God is Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Others have found traditional formulas for the Trinity far too human, far too masculine to be exact, and have offered understandings that do not limit God to gender or other human characteristics. Augustine said God is one yet three in the same way that you and I are thinking subjects: we exist, we have knowledge, and we have a will. These are all distinct yet inseparable and interrelated ways of being. He also says God is the lover, the beloved, and the love, although I'm not sure that helps a lot. It sounds much more confusing to me! Then God as Trinity has been described as the speaker, the argument, and the audience. St. Patrick was said to pick up a clover leaf to explain the Trinity to early Irish converts, saying it was three leaves on one stem of a plant. One other attempt to explain the Trinity is that Creation is like a play, and God is all at the same time the author, the main actor, and the director, therefore, God writes the script, then performs the play, and

also directs the play. Then God has been described as being like any one of us in the sense that we are one person, yet also someone's child, someone's spouse, someone's parent, someone's boss, someone's worker, and so forth. It's not easy to wrap our human minds around this whole idea.

But then there is that sculpture that I saw of "The Family," and of all places in an airport. It was one big rock, with nothing added or stuck on to it. It was one substance, monolithic in every sense of the word. From a distance it appeared to be one big unified shape. It was clear, however, upon drawing near to it, that it was not just one thing. There were five very clear faces and personalities within it. There was a protective dad, a nurturing mom, a baby looking cute, an older sibling looking responsible, and a middle sibling looking rambunctious. It wasn't just one lump of material...well, it was, but it wasn't. And without a whole lot of words coming into my mind, I had one long look and it, and said to myself, "Wow! That says so much! I love it!" I think you get the idea.

Now talking about dogma and concepts can be a bit dry. If we leave our discussion of the Trinity on just an analytical level, as if we've just dissected a science project to understand it, we miss a lot of the wonder and the beauty of our faith. Why would Christians come up with an idea that is so hard to understand?

It is because we have experienced a God that is like nothing else we have experienced. Our God is not just some big cosmic daddy. Our God seeks ways to interact with us, to relate to us, to be in relationship with us, to walk alongside of us. Our God gives us strength and courage and abilities in the here and now that we could not gain all on our own. Our God is bigger than any one thing that we already know. Our God relates to us, loves us, prods us, shows us a different way to live and be in the world. This is through the ministry of God in the human form of Jesus Christ, but it is also through the testimony of the Scriptures written before the time of Jesus. It is also through the unseen yet very real presence of God in our midst right now through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

So while the doctrine of the Trinity is the very heart of the definition of "Christian," it is more than just a novel idea. It is a way to recognize that God is a living God, one that interacts with us and loves us more than we can imagine. Our God calls us into conversation, and calls us to change in a fresh and transforming way. Our God calls us to do and to love and to be in a living and vibrant relationship with God.

Our God is not something that we created. Our God is a being that we have discovered, and aspects of our God continue to be revealed to us in fresh new ways. God doesn't fit into any earthly categories. God is far more wonderful than any of these. So that is why we choose to struggle to name God as One God in Three Persons, the Trinity. Amen.