

SERMON FOR JUNE 7, 2020 – “Trinity Sunday,” Fonthill United Church

LESSON: Matthew 28:16-20 (NRSV)

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

SERMON: “In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit”

Who is God? What is God like? What does it mean when we say that God is one? And what does it mean when we say that God is also three? If God is one, how can God also be three?

On Trinity Sunday, Christians around the world ask themselves these very questions, and together, after some serious reflection, we usually decide that the Trinity is a mystery. Like Elizabeth of the Trinity, a French Carmelite, who devoted herself to the Trinity in the early part of the last century, we try to understand how on the one hand, God is one, unchanging, eternal, and calm; and, at the same time, also creative, varied, changing, generative, temporal, exciting, always up to something new.

“O my God,” Elizabeth wrote, “Trinity whom I adore, help me to become utterly forgetful of myself so that I may establish myself in you, as changeless and calm as though my soul were already in eternity. Let nothing disturb my peace nor draw me forth from you, O my unchanging God, but at every moment may I penetrate more deeply into the depths of your mystery. Give peace to my soul; make it your heaven, your cherished dwelling-place and the place of your repose. Let me never leave you there alone, but keep me there, wholly attentive, wholly alert in my faith, wholly adoring and fully given up to your creative action.”

Elizabeth, I think, in admitting that the Trinity is a mystery, in refusing to pin God down, and make of the Trinity a rigid doctrine, exemplifies the best of the Christian tradition. Indeed, as we look for clarity about the Trinity in the writing of the early Christian church, in our Gospels or our Epistles, a fully fleshed-out Trinitarian formula is lacking. In fact, the only mention of the three parts of the Trinity, are found in our reading from Matthew today – in which the resurrected Christ, tells us to, *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”*

Jesus, and his followers, steeped in the worship of a God so mysterious that no one knew God’s name, had trinities of sorts. There were the attributes of God, for example: Mercy, Courage and Glory; and there was the work of God: Creation, Judgment and Reconciliation. But, to pin God down – to make of God a statue or a rigid doctrine – this was anathema.

And yet, we know that during the history of the chosen people, statues were made. And, we know that during Jesus’ time, Jesus often got into trouble with religious authorities because their rigid, doctrinal understanding of God did not jive with Jesus’ more fluid, personal and intimate relationship with his ‘abba.’

In fact, the doctrine of the Trinity was hammered out at the table, well after the last letter in our Bibles was written, over a hundred year period at various church councils, such as the Council of Nicaea and the Council of Chalcedon, by white, western, heterosexual European bishops, closely allied to the imperial power of the Roman empire, to whom Eastern European, or North African bishops who did not have the imperial eagle hanging over them, usually were forced to cede ground. It was these men of power and privilege who spelled out the doctrine of the Trinity for us. In the Roman Catholic Catechism, which the United Church more or less accepts, the doctrine tries to be very clear and concrete:

The Trinity is One God in three persons, who share the same nature and are of the same substance. That being so, however, the divine persons are really distinct from one another, they are not just modalities or emanations or appearances of the One. It is the Father who always generates, the Son who always is begotten, and the Holy Spirit who always proceeds. And, of course since this is a trinity, there is a third tenet, about how these three persons are relative to each other. Everything (in them) is one where there is no opposition of relationship.

I hope as I read this to you, you found some of the language a little odd, or perhaps wondered why what purports to be so simple, so clear and so concise actually sounds rather confused and silly. Certainly, if you read the various statements of the early church councils, this will become apparent.

Something was happening at those early church councils. Something was entering into the mysterious, fluid, creative, *je ne sais quoi*, that is God, and that was the early Jesus movement. Something was hardening the spirit. Taking what was flexible, responsive and warm, and replacing it with something that was the very opposite of Holy Mystery. I don't believe that the church fathers probably even realized that it was happening. They were white, male and straight, and powerful. They were doing their best. They were trying to keep the church as they knew it going. But in doing so, they infused a white, male, straight and powerful understanding into the Trinity. All three persons, for example, are male – even the Holy Spirit. In seeing the church's goals as somehow being their goals, the worm entered the apple.

Post-modern critique explains what happened, as being a fatal flaw in all systems: a naturally occurring process in which power finds a foothold, and embeds itself without anyone really knowing or understanding that this is the case, and then using the system to further its own end. All systems are vulnerable to this process -- church systems and doctrinal systems, as well as political, economic, legal systems, and workplace systems.

You have heard, I know, this week, the expression, “systemic racism.” The “systemic” you hear in this phrase is precisely this idea. We are not active racists. We do not wake up in the morning and decide that we are going to make life miserable for our black brothers and sisters. And yet, we participate and take for granted societal structures that make sure that black people are arrested, apprehended, and incarcerated at rates far exceeding any logical understanding. Without knowing it, we participate in and support a system which is unjust, and which, because it is a social fabric which rewards us and makes us happy, we cannot see as being unjust.

Sometimes, on Trinity Sunday, I have seen Spiritual leaders follow the example of St Patrick and start talking about Shamrocks, and getting very specific and literal and concrete in their explanation of the Trinity. Many people love it when the minister does this. Sometimes the church gets decorated with shamrocks. “*This is what the Trinity is like, this is who God is,*” the

ministers say, “*this is how we must understand the relationship of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.*” Everyone gets to take home a shamrock. The children go down to Sunday school and draw them. People wear green. And yet, in this comforting, fun object lesson, God becomes an object. God is three. God is one. See. It’s simple. No mystery here.

But perhaps what is more sinister is the realization that when St Patrick first came to Ireland, there were Celts there, who had their own Gods, and their own way of life. St Patrick wanted to convert these pagans, because as far as he was concerned there was nothing worthwhile about their way of living. They were damned. They needed to live by the light of Rome. And so, he watched the Celts carefully. He realized that their priests, the Druids, seemed to place a high value on plants like mistletoe and holly and other evergreens. They seemed to see the divine in the green of their island.

And so, he took a shamrock, a plant that the Celts loved, and made it an instrument of his will to make his way, the way of the people of Ireland. And, it was through the use of the Shamrock, that a people were colonized. That many of our forefathers and mothers were colonized. Just as the Jesuits here in Ontario colonized the Hurons.

Today, even if we are of Irish extraction, we forget this. We have been so acclimatized to our Christian understanding that we can no longer remember what was lost and what was found in our conversion. And yet we know that the story of what really happened cannot have been so joyful.

God is one. God is three. God is mystery. Elizabeth of the Trinity saw in this mystery her inability to apprehend God. Her powerlessness. And, in her powerlessness she discovered her strength. In her prayer to the Trinity, she writes in the portion about Christ:

O my beloved Christ, crucified for love, I long to be the bride of your heart. I long to cover you with glory, to love you even unto death! Yet I sense my powerlessness and beg you to clothe me with yourself. Identify my soul with all the movements of your soul, submerge me, overwhelm me, substitute yourself for me, so that my life may become a reflection of your life. Come into me as Adorer, as Redeemer and as Saviour.

This Trinity Sunday, as demonstrations rage, as the words systemic racism swirl around us, let us seek to understand the systems that power has corrupted in our lives. And let us admit, that one of these systems may very well be the church, and the faith, and the triune God we hold so dear.

Let us embrace the mystery that is needed, so that God can continue to do something new in our hearts, and to realize that dogma in many cases is not life-giving.

And you, O Holy Parent, bend down towards your poor little creature. Cover her with your shadow, see in her only your beloved children in who you are well pleased.