

A Sermon for Trinity Sunday 2014
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It's the feast of the Holy Trinity, a feast dedicated to God in all of God's mysterious, complicated self.

It is the custom of the Church to put the seminarian in the pulpit on Trinity Sunday, or the clergy person with the least seniority, not because they have taken theology classes most recently and are therefore able to expound best on this most impenetrable of mysteries of our faith, but because the incomprehensibility of the Trinity pretty much defies preaching, and so senior clergy foist it off on the powerless. But since I'm all you've got, clergy-wise, we're all in this thing together.

Now the doctrine of the Trinity, the idea that God is somehow both one indivisible God, unchanging and omnipotent; and at the same time three distinct persons operating in history in different ways doesn't show up anywhere in the Bible. It was, however, formulated to try to reconcile some things the Bible says about God that seem contradictory.

The main difficulty is this question about Jesus – just what was he? A man sent by God, or God in person? Scripture refers to him both ways. Jesus himself speaks often of being sent by the Father, but also says God is in him and he is in God. John's gospel identifies Jesus with "the Word" and says

the Word, at the beginning of creation, was with God and was God. So you can see that if you are going to take scripture seriously, the answer to the question about what Jesus is will not be a simple one.

And after a lot of arguments and, regrettably, a fair amount of bloodshed, the Church realized that the answer scripture really points to is surpassingly strange: Jesus is not solely human, not solely God, and not a hybrid, half-human, half God deity like, say, Hercules of Greek mythology. Jesus is rather one hundred percent human and one hundred percent God at the same time, all the time.

Now that mystery is the central theme of Christmas, but that odd and hard-to-fully-grasp answer doesn't end the mystery about God, because we still have all of the language in scripture about the Holy Spirit. It too begins at the beginning, for while John's gospel puts Jesus at the center of the act of creation in those words "In the beginning was the Word," the creation story in the book of Genesis says that creation was accomplished by the Spirit of God moving through creation, calling order out of chaos, calling life out of the barren earth. And the Spirit is a part of God's story all the way through, inspiring the prophets, speaking for God, inspiring and often terrifying people throughout history.

Which leaves us with a similar question to the one about Jesus: just what is this Holy Spirit? God? An emissary from God? Just a way of talking about God at work in the world?

The theological clincher in scripture for the Trinity comes in First John, when God and the Holy Spirit are invoked as testifying to the divinity of the Son. At that point, we cannot fail to notice that God is a lot more complicated than we had known. Indeed, God is probably more complicated than we would like.

And so, for nearly the last two thousand years we have been trying, or saddling our seminarians with trying to explain this very complicated God.

How can three things be one thing? Is God like ice, water and steam? Is God like the elephant to the blind men, different depending on how you encounter God? Is God like quantum states, remaining both particle and wave until observed, and then becoming one or the other?

My current favorite of these kinds of explanations has to do with our senses – apprehended by the ear, God is Holy Spirit. Apprehended by taste and touch and sight, God is human: Jesus, the Son. Apprehended by our knowing that is beyond our senses, God is the first person of the Trinity, transcendent and majestic.

But whichever explanation you like for God's simultaneous multiplicity and oneness, I don't think these explanations actually bring us closer to God. God's nature, although we can name it, is still a mystery; God's person is still, well, let's just say that if God had a Facebook page, the relationship status would be "It's Complicated."

But that is, I think, the whole point of the doctrine of the Trinity: to hold before us the simple truth that God is too complicated to understand. Which should, perhaps, be obvious from a little contemplation of ourselves.

You, after all, are also too complicated to understand.

We all know this is true of ourselves, although we don't necessarily want to believe it of others. Believing in simple people with simple motives makes our lives easier. "He's just jealous." "She's only saying that because she's afraid." "Why are you such a mean person?"

Although we know that we ourselves do things for complicated reasons, we tend to ascribe simple motives to others. But I am not "just jealous." I act as I do because, well, I have my reasons. Lots of them. Jealousy may be one, but fear of failure, and the argument I had this morning, and too much coffee, and annoyance that I have to deal with this problem today, and the

way you remind me of my father sometimes, all inform my actions. And that's just the beginning of the list. I am a complicated person, and I do things for complicated reasons.

Realizing that others are as complicated in their motives as we are is the beginning of understanding and communication and even community.

And the doctrine of the Trinity helps remind us that God, and God's motives, are at least as complicated as our own. We may well not like this truth about God either. A God with simple motives, a jealous God, a loving God, a patient God, an angry God, is easy to understand, and behaves in predictable if sometimes unpleasant ways.

But our God is not a simple God. Our God is not a comprehensible God. Our God is not a predictable God.

Which is a very good thing. For even when God is most angry at our faithlessness, our enmity, our selfishness, God is still motivated also by compassion and forgiveness. Even when God is most sorrowful at our cruelty and insensitivity to others in their need, God is still also motivated by parental affection, Even at God's most distant, transcendent and ineffable, God is still completely present, accessible, and active in our lives.

Our mysterious, complicated God does mysterious complicated things.

Things like responding to the brokenness of the world by becoming so

deeply a part of the world that our brokenness became God's brokenness, and God's wholeness became our wholeness. Things like filling the world with the Holy Spirit so that we might be led into the mysteries and complexities of holiness and divinity even though we do not know the way. Our God does mysterious and complicated things like loving us in all of our own complications and mysteries, loving us so deeply and truly that we are transformed by that love; so that we, the humanity that God so loves, who are ourselves many more than three, are also one, in the unity of the Trinity.

Amen.