

A Sermon for Trinity Sunday 2015  
St. James' Church. Mt. Airy  
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Today is Trinity Sunday, the only commemoration in our church calendar that remembers a doctrine rather than a person or event. And it's a difficult doctrine – if you want to know how difficult, how much it vexed the earliest Christian theologians, just turn to page 864 in the Book of Common Prayer, in the section of the book called Historical Documents of the church, and read just a bit of what is commonly called the Athanasian Creed, although it was written at least a century before Athanasius lived.

It is still read in some churches on Trinity Sunday, but I won't make you do that today. It begins like this:

Whosoever will be saved,  
before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholic Faith.  
Which Faith except everyone do keep whole and undefiled,  
without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.  
And the Catholic Faith is this:  
That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity,  
neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance.  
For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son,  
and another of the Holy Ghost.  
But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost,  
is all one, the Glory equal, the Majesty co-eternal.  
Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Ghost.  
The Father uncreate, the Son uncreate, and the Holy Ghost uncreate.  
The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible,  
and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible.  
The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Ghost eternal.  
And yet they are not three eternal, but one eternal.  
As also there are not three incomprehensibles, nor three uncreated, but one  
uncreated, and one incomprehensible...

You might be forgiven for thinking that the Creed itself, or at least the doctrine of the Trinity that it espouses, is the fourth incomprehensible.

Why all this fuss about an idea that is not actually mentioned in the Bible? The reason I think, is that throughout the long history of the followers of Jesus, people have felt the need to make some kind of sense of their own experiences of God, and those experiences have been varied, complex, and, to be frank, ultimately incomprehensible. Sometimes people's lives have been changed merely by hearing about Jesus and the Good News he brought. At other times, sometimes to the same people, the palpable presence of God, the depth of God's love, or the terror of God's anger has changed lives. And sometimes it is the inspiration of the Spirit of God, wild and unpredictable, but powerfully persuasive, that has moved, enlightened, and directed the faith and works of Jesus' friends and followers.

How can we explain the reality of the Spirit of God, the Son of God, and God's immortal, invisible self in light of what Scripture tells us and taking into account our own transformative experiences? It is a question both compelling and confusing.

Our gospel story today is one I have preached about before, for it appears in our cycle of readings elsewhere as well. The last time it came up, I preached about the importance of story in the context of Nicodemus' life, our own lives, and in the life of our community, which I illustrated with the story of this Bible, which is part of the story of this community.

I told you then that this Gospel lesson is one of three stories in John's gospel about this man named Nicodemus. It is the first of those three, and in it Nicodemus, a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council of Elders in Jerusalem, sneaks away by night to have an odd and inspiring conversation with Jesus.

The second time John's gospel mentions him, Nicodemus is defending Jesus before the Sanhedrin, and saying that the laws of their community require a fair hearing before anyone is condemned, and for his efforts Nicodemus gets accused of being a Galilean (which was both a

clan designation and an insult in first-century Jerusalem) and therefore accused of being biased in Jesus' favor.

Nicodemus' third appearance in John's gospel is after Jesus' death, when he helps Simon of Arimathea bury Jesus, and provides the myrrh and aloe with which to anoint Jesus' body.

When I preached on this Gospel lesson before, I asked you to imagine Nicodemus telling his story to the Gospel writer John, telling him how Jesus said many things that were confusing at the time, but which stuck with him, and after hearing them, nothing in Nicodemus' life was ever the same.

Today, I would ask you to think about Jesus telling these things to Nicodemus – trying to explain the workings of the Spirit, the love of God, and the transformation of the world to someone who had yet to experience that transformation. Jesus is trying to explain something too strange for Nicodemus to understand in a way that will stick with him as he grows into understanding. This is, I think, a rather difficult task.

My father, who was an engineer by profession, is a master explainer. He knows an amazing amount of stuff, from nuclear physics to the ins and outs of politics to the life cycles of just about every species of mosquito to the workings of Gilbert and Sullivan operettas. And he can explain anything he knows to absolutely anyone in a way that will both be understandable and excite curiosity.

I can still remember when I was five or six asking my father why my finger got cold when I licked it and then blew on it. And somehow he managed to explain to me the energy needed for phase changes and then on to how refrigerators and air conditioners work in a way that grew as my knowledge and vocabulary increased without ever needing to be abandoned. My lifelong

curiosity about how the world works came from my father's patient explanations and his obvious fascination with just about everything.

I tell you this story because I think our doctrine of the Trinity, whether in its simplest formulation of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, or in those many metaphors that preachers use: Water, Ice and Steam, say, or the story of the Blind Men and the Elephant, or in dense theological constructions like the Athanasian Creed, are all the same kinds of conditional explanations of the nature of God as my Dad's lesson on refrigeration, meant for a five year old. Our doctrine of the Trinity is, I believe, true, but it is merely a beginning, a framework upon which, as we grow in wisdom, experience and vocabulary, we can grow our understanding of God's very complicated self.

Is it necessary to understand the deep nature of our three-personed God in order to be a person of faith, or a follower of Jesus? Absolutely not. But it is necessary for us to have a framework that will help us to understand what our experiences of God in the person of the Father or the Son or the Spirit tell us about who we are in relation to God. That framework of understanding, that God is three persons yet one God, is passing strange. But it does help us to understand that our awed encounters with the Creator, our personal encounters with Jesus, and our surprising, inspiring encounters with the Spirit are all encounters with the same God.

And at the same time, that Trinitarian framework keeps before us the certainty that as close as we are to the heart of God, we still don't understand God more than very slightly. God's nature, although we can name it, is still a mystery; God's person is still incomprehensibly complicated. And that, as I said to you last year on Trinity Sunday, but it bears repeating, is really the whole point of the doctrine of the Trinity: to hold before us the simple truth that God is too complicated

to understand. Which, and this also bears repeating, should be obvious when we look at ourselves, made in God's image.

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.