

“On the Trinity”

Genesis 1:1-8, 26-31, 2:1-4; Matthew 28: 16-20

First Sunday after Pentecost, (June 18) 2011

Trinity Sunday

Kyle Childress

I am fascinated by music. I can't sing. I can't read music. And I've never had any musical training. But I'm fascinated by it. I'm fascinated by how music is written and how it is performed and its theory and on and on. I'm fascinated that more than one thing happens at a time in music. It is that each note be sounded clearly and distinctly, yet we enjoy hearing a mass of different notes all played at once. Simultaneous multiplicity is encouraged in music. Polyphony, harmony does not seek to include individual notes in monolithic homogeneity but rather to rejoice in their interesting relationships, contrasts, and contributions to one another.

I think music suggests that truth might be symphonic, polyphonic. What if truth is like that of scripture - multi-vocal, multivalent, full of digressions and details that are not easily integrated into a unified, univocal reading? What if truth is as inherently conflicted and resistant to singular, authoritative readings just like for example, the book of Job or the Gospel of John? Some scholars say truth has a thickness of meaning and biblical scholars and theologians agree that Scripture and Christian theology have a thickness of meaning – which means they resist having one and only one answer. To deal with God, we have to learn to hold multiple ideas and images together at one time. God is so much more than we can say in only one way.

This morning I want you to be able to hold more than only one truth in your head at once because I am going to try something risky. I am going to try to preach Christian doctrine to you, the thickest, most challenging, and mysterious of all doctrines, the doctrine of the Trinity. I do so not only because this is Trinity Sunday but also because we are gathered together in the name of a specific, unique God whom we name as the Trinity.

The doctrine of the Trinity is the greatest intellectual achievement of Christian theology. It is our talk about God. It is that which preserves Christian talk about God from sliding into a morass of trivialities, superficialities, and other ways our modern culture tries to talk about “spirituality” - that is, a projection of our egos and narcissistic longings into something called “god.” The Trinity is that which makes clear that whoever we mean with the name *God* we’re not talking about us. The great theologian Karl Barth said, “God is not ‘man’ [or human] said in a loud voice.” We’re not here on Sunday mornings to talk about ourselves, our spiritualities, or some projection of what we think god should be. We’re here to talk about the God known as Trinity. We are specific. At the same time, it is also true that the Trinity is that which indicates the sort of lives we are called to live if we are to worship the true and living God.

As masterful interpreter of the Trinity, David Cunningham puts it this way: In the Trinity Christians attempt to account for the complex biblical testimony that, “(1) God remained all-powerful and transcendent, and yet (2) Jesus, who died and was raised by God, was somehow also God; moreover, (3) the Spirit, poured out on the Church, is also God, and yet (4) there is only one God.”

From the beginning of Christian thought, we have struggled to do justice to thinking about God as a trinity. Our life together is a play upon the world stage in

which God is simultaneously the author, the main actor, and the director. God writes the script, performs the play, and directs the play, bringing in a host of other actors whom God prompts to ensure the enactment of the drama (Hans Urs von Balthasar). God is the lover, the beloved, and the love (Augustine); God is the speaker, the argument, and the audience.

But I didn't bring you down this path simply to talk abstractly about Christian theology. I want us to talk about the practical consequences of the Trinity. Charles Wesley sang in one of his hymns, "You whom he ordained to be Transcripts of the Trinity." You and I are created by the Trinity to be transcripts of the Trinity. God is writing a message to the world upon us, speaking to the world of God's inner being through our lives that are formed in the likeness of the Trinity. What does that mean for us?

Just last week, to note the latest, I talked about how we are made for communion, for community, for relationship. We are hardwired that way because we are made in the image of God who is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who is perfect relationship, perfect communion. And we are to live out who this God is.

Traditional doctrinal language about the Trinity has said that God is three persons but one substance. Yet remember for the Greek speaking theologians who used the word "person" in describing the Trinity, they were thinking of the "persona" which was the mask used in theatre. The same actor would use a different mask or "persona" to portray a different character in a play, but it was always the same actor. The God we worship is always One, but known in three ways.

For example, as a contrasting view, Mormons believe that the Godhead is three separate beings but one in purpose, but not one in substance.

Christian Trinitarian thought loves a word, used by Gregory of Nazianzus and Maximus the Confessor, to describe the inner life and the outer working of the Trinity as *perichorisis*. It means literally in the Greek, “to dance around.” Hear in the root word the same word we use in “choreography” when talking about dance. “Perichorisis” is an image of God in which the Triune God is eternally moving, dancing, giving, turning toward and into with the other persons of the Trinity. But it can also mean “interpenetration,” (Latin, *circumincession*: “coinherence”) suggesting dynamic, intimate, participation of the Three who are One.

So *perichorisis*, this eternally dancing in a way that is ever self-giving, self-offering, sharing, cooperating, and coordinating is who God is. It is an image of God always making room within Godself. Our God is always reaching out, speaking forth, reaching in, even as the Father is always reaching toward and talking to the Son, and the Son is always speaking to the Father, and the Holy Spirit is always reaching toward the Son and the Father, each always making room for the other, because it is the nature of love to make room for others. It is the nature of the church to mirror and reflect this God in how we live. We are ever giving, offering, serving, cooperating, coordinating, moving toward and with others. And we are always making room for others. We are in communion and this communion is always full of mutual giving, offering, and serving because this is who God is.

Which brings us to our Old Testament lesson for today, the story of Creation from Genesis 1 and the beginning of chapter 2. Creation is God giving and making room for more creatures to enjoy life and love together. It is the essence of God to

create and share and give and make room in harmony and polyphony, with such delight and joy and love that it is very good. Creation is this extraordinary, imaginative abundance of life and difference and it all comes about by God speaking.

Notice that we do not believe that Creation came about because of a war in heaven where matter came from the body of the losers of the war. We do not believe that the essence of Creation is violence or conflict or competition. We do not believe in a divine hierarchy, where God the Father is over the Son who is over the Holy Spirit or some other variation of power. The God we know as Triune is equally sharing in love and in giving, making room for differences, and God sharing. Love, peaceful sharing, and self-giving is the reality at the heart of the universe.

I bring all this up this morning for several reasons. It is important to know these basic Christian doctrines and remember that we have a long history of specific and clear teachings on who God is. We don't make this up. Furthermore, there are serious consequences to these doctrines.

There are many who believe that the essence of the universe is violence and conflict and competition and they believe that for us to pretend otherwise is to go against the basic nature of reality. Therefore when we are in conflict and war we are simply being who we are and the best thing we can do is make sure we win when we're in conflict. And I'm here to tell you that whatever this is, it has nothing to do with Christian teaching.

The most powerful and pervasive ideology in the world today is global free-market capitalism. Capitalism is founded upon certain assumptions like self-

interest and competition. Adam Smith, the founder of modern capitalism famously said that we should not count on the benevolence of the butcher to provide us with meat. Instead, we should look to the butcher's self-interest in making money.

My friend Norman Wirzba points out that there is a basic difference in one's business if the goal is "making money" or "making a living." When I was growing up, it was common to refer to how one "made a living" more than how one "made money." Wirzba says that "making a living" has to do with a larger number of factors than simply the self-interest of money. Making a living has to do with one's family – do we see each other and spend time together? It has to do with neighbors and with community and home (see Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating*, p. 98).

In my small hometown when I was a boy, we had three hardware stores around the square, at least one grocery store, two furniture stores, three pharmacies, three movie theatres (although when I was little only one was left) and four clothing stores – that I can remember. They were all locally owned and they were all "making a living" – meaning that they were all making enough money to live on. None of those were people who were considered rich and most all of them were neighbors, were in church with one another, volunteered with the fire department together and the PTA, and Scouts, and so on. Their lives, like all of ours, were connected in various ways.

It was common for my mom to take my brother and me down to one of the stores for blue-jeans or shoes or shirts. If Webb's didn't have our size in stock, they would offer to order it, or the clerk would pick up the phone and call across the square to Hassan's or to one of the other clothing stores, and tell them that

Lindle Childress was down looking for blue-jeans for her boys in sizes such-and-such, did they have those sizes? If so, the clerk sent us over to the other store.

Pure free-market capitalism says that such practices are against self-interest and the laws of competition. Free-market capitalism says that those four clothing stores were in a competition for the market and that eventually only the most ruthlessly efficient would survive. Furthermore, free-market capitalism says that all this is good for the consumer.

But those stores and their owners and clerks were interested in making a living rather than simply beating their competition. They were interested in serving Lindle Childress, who taught their teenage daughter in Sunday School, and with whom they all volunteered together in the PTA. They were neighbors who cooperated with one another rather than competed.

Now I'm not suggesting that small town life of the 1950's and 60's was in essence Christian. But I am trying to give us a snapshot of how economics has been and can be different from the war of making money that we call global free-market capitalism that is pervasive today. And I'm trying to show us that it makes all the difference in which God we worship.

Whether admitted or not, the God of global free-market capitalism is not the biblical God known as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The God which seems to rule the world today is a god of conflict, competition, power, self, and violence.

We worship the Trinitarian God who is eternally giving, sharing, and making room in love and joy. This is who God is, and it is who those of us who follow this God are called to be. Amen and amen.