

“Jesus Complicates Things”

A Sermon for Trinity Sunday

Hey, it's Trinity Sunday. Hold onto your hats. We are about to do a deep dive into one of the most complex, wonderful of Christian beliefs. Sorry, if you have come to church this morning to learn more about yourself, to find something that will make your life a bit more livable. We're going to talk about God this Sunday called Trinity, not about you.

All of this Sunday's scripture, like most of scripture, depicts people being encountered by God. Why do we have as strange a concept as God is triune? We have the doctrine of the Trinity because we have Jesus Christ. Many people thought they had a good grasp of who God was and what God is up to. Then came Jesus. And listening to Jesus, watching him work, dying on the cross and rising from the dead, people had to immediately start revising and complexifying their notions of God.

Everything we believe about God flows from what we've seen of God in Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, God gets personal, relational, available (and virtually unavoidable), too close for comfort and too multifaceted, complex, and challenging for our simple explanations for God..

Sometimes people say things to you like, “I'm Hindu, you're Christian, but we all believe in God, right?” While we certainly believe that there is only one God, when you ask someone, “Well tell me what you believe about God,” you often quickly realize that whatever God they are believing in, doesn't seem to be the God who meets us in Jesus Christ.

In his first advent among us, Jesus as the “Son of God,” the “Messiah” (that is, “anointed one of God”) challenged how people thought about God. Lots of people looked at Jesus, listened to his teaching, witnessed his work, saw his death and said, “That's not God. God is,, powerful, distant, high and lifted up, God is _____.” (Fill in the blank with whatever high and noble attribute God simply must have if God is to be worthy of your worship.) Jesus failed to measure up to their preconceptions of who God ought to be and how God is to act if God is really God. The church had to come up with the idea of God not only being one, but also *at the same time* being Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to do justice to Jesus as God's self-definition.

When we say the words of the Apostle's Creed, “I believe in God the Father Almighty...*and* in Jesus Christ, God's only begotten Son... [*and*] I believe in the Holy Spirit...” We assert a considerably more complex and challenging view of God than that which prevails among most Americans. You would think that we would say, “I believe in God the father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth,” and leave it at that. After all, nine out of 10 Americans would probably affirm that. But the Creed goes on to affirm that God is also the Son, Jesus Christ. And then the Creed says that God is all so the mysterious, dynamic, revealing, Holy Spirit. And yet, there is only one God.

To say that God is triune is to say more about God than many people want said. Most people in our society appear to want God to be generic, abstract, vague, distant, and arcane.

“God? Oh, can't say anything too definite about God. God is large...indistinct, vague.” “God” for many of us is this big, blurry concept that we can make to mean about anything we like, something “spiritual,” someone (if we have any distinct notions about God) whom we can make over so that God looks... strikingly like us.

In Jesus of Nazareth, God got physical, explicit, peculiar, and came close – too close for comfort for many. Jesus Christ is God in action, God refusing to remain a general idea or a high sounding principle. Jesus Christ is God in motion toward us, God refusing to stay enclosed in God's own divinity.

Many people think of God as a vaguely benevolent being -- who never actually gets around to doing anything. A minimalist, inactive, unobtrusive, noninvasive, detached God who is just about as much of a God as we moderns can take.

Or we attempt to render Jesus into a wonderful moral teacher who was a really nice person who enjoyed lilies and was kind to children and people with disabilities. Jesus, from the first, refused to be managed by us. From the first, his followers came to the conclusion, "Jesus is not only a human being but also God." They started saying things like, "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corin. 5:19). This was saying more about Jesus than he was a really fine person who set us a good ethical example.

God is One; but not simply One, not merely One. We baptize in the name of the Trinity thus signifying that baptism relates us to the fullness of God. We are monotheists (belief in one God) but not mere monotheists. We believe that the God who is present to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is One. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three distinct yet unified and interactive, relational and loving ways in which God is one. The Trinity is God in three ways being the same God. We believe Jesus is God, Holy Spirit is God, Father is God, only one God!

Unitarianism is always a bit easier on the brain than Trinitarianism. No way for us to do justice to the God whom we have met in Jesus Christ without believing three ways in one God.

Here again, in my experience, in order to keep God distant, vague (and irrelevant) many people want to keep God simple, uncomplicated, and abstract. These are the dear folk who say, "Well, I'm not sure that I'm very religious, but I do believe in God and, after all, isn't that what it's all about?"

The problem is that once we discovered that "God was in Christ," things got complicated not because the church wanted to make the simple faith of Jesus complex and confusing but rather because we discovered in Jesus that God was at once much more demanding and much more interesting than we had first thought. After being met by Jesus, we could never again think of God in the simple, uncomplicated way as we had before.

1. God is the creative, caring **Father**, but not simply at the beginning of Creation. The same darkness-to-light, nothing-worked up into-something of Genesis 1 continues every day of our lives. God keeps creating, bringing something out of nothing, making a way when there was thought to be no way. God keeps caring, keeps reaching out to us in active love, constantly watches over us in vigorous providential care.

2. God is the redeeming, loving, seeking **Son** who ventures forth like some Prodigal Son (Luke 15) to search out and to save lost humanity in the "far country" where we live. When God decisively, revealingly came to us God came to us as one of us. God got incarnate as a Jew from Nazareth who was born in a most embarrassing way to a young peasant woman, grew up to be a man about whom we know next to nothing save his three years as a young adult in ministry, and was tortured to death by the government. That one is God among us.

The gospels don't tell us everything that Jesus said and did. They appear to limit themselves only to those words and events that are related to our redemption. The gospels tell us only those things about Jesus that directly relate to God doing something about the problem between God and us. The name Jesus (or "Joshua") means "God saves" and the gospels depict Jesus as God's answer to what's wrong between us and God, God saving the world, "for God so loved the world..." (John 3:16).

As the writer to the church at Ephesus put it, "You who were far off have been made one by the blood of Christ. He has broken down the dividing wall between us." (Eph. 2:14). Here is a living, active, loving God who makes union and breaks barriers. When the far off one who has

been brought near is you, when the wall that has been kicked down is the wall that you built in a vain attempt to keep God out of your life, you really know that God is not just “God.” God is *pro nobis*, God for us.

It’s easy to stress only the first person of the Trinity – God the creative, ordering, providential Father – rather than God the redeeming Son or God the relentlessly reaching Holy Spirit. The more chaotic and confusing our world becomes, it seems the more we need to stress God the Creator. (“God has a plan for your life!”) However, because of the work of the reaching, seeking, redeeming Son, the second person of the Trinity – we are given a lively view of Christ as Savior of the World.

3. God is the present, dynamic **Holy Spirit** who is God near to us, God empowering us to do those things that we could never do on our own, God constantly revealing God to us, God talking to us about God.

The Holy Spirit chiefly by the effects in us of the Spirit as “the cause of all holiness in us; enlightening our understandings, rectifying our wills and affections, renewing our natures, uniting...assuring...leading...purifying and sanctifying” us to “full and eternal enjoyment of God.” In God the Son we have God’s atoning and reconciling work for us. In God the Holy Spirit we have God’s sanctifying and redeeming work in us, now, here.

All three, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are aspects of, characteristics of, the truth about the identity and being of the one God who reaches out to us in three ways.

Will you agree with me when I say that one of the great challenges of the Christian faith is to honor persons of the Trinity, to keep connected to and you keep working with the one God who comes to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? The Christian life become a long process of discovering that the name “God” means so much more than we first thought, is infinitely rich and varied.

Christians are those who not only are attempting to stay in love with God; we are being loved by, and attempting to return love to the one God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

—William H. Willimon © 2021