

We Don't Know Much
A Sermon for Every Sunday
Trinity Sunday, Year C
Rev. Sue Eaves

Trinity Sunday is one of those divine sense of humor days for preachers: God's reminder that we don't know much!

Preaching about the Trinity is hard not because I struggle with the doctrine of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: three persons but one God. Rather, I struggle because words defeat me when I try to express through words this experience of God; this experience that has led the church, led us, to describe God as three in one and one in three. It's when we try to put this experience into words that we begin to glimpse the difficulty of speaking of the great mystery of God at all. We begin to see that God is a lot bigger, a lot more alive, a lot more than we are.

Yet, this description of God as Trinity is singularly Christian. It is unique among the three great Abrahamic faiths. It is not too much to say that without the Trinity Christianity would lose much of its distinctness. There is very little in the Christian story itself that is not repeated in one form or another in other traditions. But the Christian grasp of relationship with the Triune God is unique. No other major faith captures the dynamic mystery of divine love in quite this way. The language about God as Trinity and Unity offers a very particular insight into our understanding of God.

The description of God as Trinity has survived the test of time. Formulaic words cannot be credited with its persistence. They are no more than words on a page if they are not capturing some truth about our God. We speak of Trinity not because we understand it, not because it is an exercise in logic but because, however poorly, it describes

something about the way God reveals Godself to us that seems real. It isn't enough for us to say we experience God in only one way. We sense there is more to God (and more to us) than that.

How does this happen?

Years ago, I served as priest at an Episcopal school. One spring break my husband and I traveled to New Mexico, arriving late at night. The next morning I was stunned to discover that a young girl I had left healthy and well in Richmond the day before was about to die. There was nothing I could do. I was a long way from home. Much as I was desperate to do so, there was no way I could get home in time.

So we did the only thing we could. We went to pray in a small shrine in a place called Chimayo, a holy place since ancient times; first as a Native American holy place, then a Franciscan Shrine standing on the edge of the desert. A sacred hillside. A thin place between God and the creation.

We sat silently inside that exquisite mission church watching the dust float in the rays of sun that pierced the shadows. Thousands of pilgrims had traveled there over the centuries to talk with God. I have rarely been any place where even the air was filled with life and mystery.

The walls of the building were covered by humble tin paintings of thanksgiving for blessings and healings and prayers answered. Each pilgrim kneels beside a well filled with earth. Each day the well is filled with soil from the sacred hillside. Pilgrims rub it into their face and on hands and arms and legs. The dirt is not magical in itself. But it is the visible and outward sign of the powerful presence and grace of the living God.

In that place I encountered that rare but familiar sense of connection. There in the presence of the angels, the tourists, the pilgrims past and present, the long departed Franciscan monks and the spirits of the Native Americans, the friends and colleagues in Richmond, the sick young woman, my own family, and my husband sitting beside me, I was given a glimpse of the life that loves us more than life itself. I experienced its' living presence and power. The encounter with the one-ness of everything and the encounter with the diversity and particularity of everything - one God and three persons.

Chimayo is a place in which all life comes together. A place where I knew myself as person in relationship to myself, but also a person in relationship to all that lives. And though there is distress, there is nothing to fear because nothing can fall outside the eternal loving we name as God.

Such experiences lead us to speak of God as Trinity.

Just as I did not lose a sense of myself as a person complete in my own right, so we speak of the distinctness of each of the persons of the Trinity. Each has a beauty unique to that person. God as Father. God as Son. God as Holy Spirit. We know each of these persons differently. These relationships call out and express different parts of our own faith. To relate to each of these persons is to bring greater wholeness to our knowing of God.

I come to know God as the faithful sustainer of my life, the saving grace in my life, the fire of love in my life.

It is the same when I look outward at the world - whether I consider the evolution of life, the cycle of the season, the birth of a child, the radical surprise of human events, or the approaching death of a young woman, disastrous flooding in the mid-west, racial

or ethnic hatred we can offer hope, strength, and understanding to those who suffer. Why? Because we know God as the One who is eternally creating, sustaining, and saving. God will never let the last word be despair.

Yet, we will also want to say the Trinity is One. Unity. Just as we experience God in the individual persons of the Trinity, so we experience God as whole. God is always God however and wherever we encounter God. Angels always remind us to fear not in that encounter, for the encounter with God is awesome and unmistakable. Chimayo was filled with the holy. And the holy is identifiable, recognizable, tangible, wherever we might find it. It is also awesome and powerful.

God is One AND God is three. This knowing of God springs not from the mind but from the heart where God makes God known. As we encounter God we meet the life of God - God as God. God as persons. God not as adverbs, but God as who. God in relationship with God and God in relationship with us.

The Trinity is a picture of the life of God. Love going on forever. Love creating life forever. Love caring and saving forever. Love filled with the fire of the Spirit. Love ever open - stooping down to raise up the lowly, holding safely all that is and all that has been and all that will be.

We discover that God is essentially social as creation is essentially social, as we are essentially social. The Trinity isn't a formula – it's an expression, a summary if you like, of everything we experience about God and reality. Everything we experience about ourselves and our relationships. We are individually unique and relational by nature. We cannot become the person God has made us to be in isolation. We are a people called to journey as community.

As that community we are called to embrace human differences. As community we are called to celebrate common life and depth of differences. Community brings into being something new. As community we reach out to draw all people into its embrace.

Right now, in the midst of the chaos and fear that fill our world, where hate can seem to be gaining the upper hand, where bullies of all kinds are out in force we, and the world, need community as we have never needed it before. As Christians, we are the carriers of the story about the nature and capacity of community. Our vocation is to make the divine community real not only here in the church but out there where it is so badly needed.

God's community has an ancient tradition. When the world as we know feels it is about to explode we do not turn our back on the task ahead. We speak the truth concerning the corruption of our times, we demand better from the people of God. We care about the fate of the poor, and insist there is hope. God, we promise, will not let us be destroyed.

This is not a vain hope. We know it because the Trinity is not a cold, formulaic, politically inspired, description of a rather awkward part of our faith. It is a God given insight into the nature of the way things are, of the way we are, of the way God is. Trinity is the model for divine life and the model for our own. We are made in the image of God. The image is individual and personal and communal and dynamic. It connects and it transforms. It saves.

Amen.

—*Sue Eaves* © 2019