

Baptipresbycostal
A Sermon for Trinity Sunday
Matthew 28:18-20

I might as well confess: I was raised by Presbyterians. It seems like a long time ago now but I still have some memories of those days. I remember shining my sturdy Buster Brown shoes before church. I remember studying a pink, paperback catechism that asked and answered all the important theological questions. I remember learning the Lord's Prayer and the Apostle's Creed that we recited together in worship each week. But mostly I remember that we talked a lot about God, or, as they sometimes said it in those churches I attended, "*Gawd!*"

On the whole, Presbyterians are a highly literate people. They seem to attract educated, affluent, professionals, and their articulation of the Christian faith tends to be fairly cerebral. If the Presbyterians were going to pick a favorite person of the Trinity, it would probably be "God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth." There seems to be a love among the Presbyterians for the kind of awe and reverence that God inspires. I remember my mother sitting on the floor of our bedroom when I was a boy, holding the hymnbook in her lap as she tried to teach her sons all four verses of "Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise." We would lie in our bunks and taste those exotic words on our tongues, picturing a God so bathed in light as to be inaccessible, "hid from our eyes." And it wasn't only the hymns. In the words and worship and witness of the Presbyterian church, God often seemed to be "up there" somewhere, watching over his people, and over us—his children—with a patient, paternal eye.

But then, when I was thirteen years old, I began attending a little Pentecostal church not far from our home in West Virginia, and I got another impression of God altogether. It started when my brother Scott was invited to this church by some neighbors and when he came back he was laughing and crying and as happy as I had ever seen him. I suppose I went out of curiosity. When I got there I found a crowd of simple, mountain people jammed into that building: women with long hair, long skirts, and a conspicuous lack of jewelry, men who talked loud and laughed hard and gave each other holy hugs, and a bluegrass kind of worship band that sat up on the platform playing drums and guitars without ever changing expression. But when Pastor Tommy Wingo began to preach things got lively. His sermon was interrupted every once in a while by a loud gasp, as if someone had just smacked him on the back, and then he would let loose with a string of words in some unintelligible language: “speaking in tongues” they called it. Once he got started everybody did. People spoke and shouted and cried in tongues. Others walked up and down the aisle with their arms waving and their eyes closed. Every once in a while a woman would pass out somewhere near the front of the church, “slain in the Spirit” as they said. It was like nothing I had ever seen in the Presbyterian Church, but there was something about it that was enormously exciting. In that little church the extraordinary Spirit of God was moving among the most ordinary people you have ever seen. Coal miners and grocery store clerks and people on welfare were “filled with the Holy Ghost,” as they put it, empowered by a God who was not “up there” somewhere, but right down there in that white clapboard church on a creek bank in West Virginia. In the few months I spent visiting that church I learned some important lessons

and gained a deep appreciation for a God who is not only transcendent, but also immanent.

And then, in college, I got acquainted with the Baptists. It started in my junior year when I fell in love with a pretty Baptist girl from another state. She sent me an application for admission to her college almost as a joke. On a whim, I filled it out, and on a whim, they accepted me. So, in the fall of 1979 I transferred from St. Andrews Presbyterian College in North Carolina to Georgetown College in Kentucky, a Baptist school. I went to a meeting of the Baptist Student Union during that first week where a student stood up to make an announcement about a disco to raise money for summer missions. “I want you to come,” he said. “I want you to shake your body for Lottie and shake your fanny for Annie.” Everybody laughed, and I did, too, but I had to ask my girlfriend later who Lottie and Annie were. Lottie Moon, *of course*; Annie Armstrong, *duh!* Famous Baptist missionary women, revered as saints.

But not even Lottie and Annie could compete with the Baptist admiration for Jesus. Baptists, as you know, are big on salvation, and so there is an understandable emphasis on Jesus the Savior. Out on the American frontier Baptist preachers used to claim that they were saving sinners from the fires of Hell like you would snatch a burning log from the fire, an idea that has persisted among Baptists and inspired a worship style that focuses on the altar call, that time when people are encouraged to come forward and make a profession of faith in Christ. Sometimes they are encouraged by fifteen or sixteen verses of “Just as I Am.” Along with the need for salvation Baptists emphasize the need for a genuine relationship with Jesus. They speak of him as their “personal” Lord and Savior. Some of the students I met at Georgetown talked about him as if they had just

come from having lunch together, and I envied them the ease and the intimacy of that relationship. “What a friend we have in Jesus,” they sang, and indeed they did.

Looking back it seems to me that each of these traditions that contribute to my rich Baptipresbycostal heritage emphasizes a different aspect of the Trinity. If you painted images of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit on three panels of a large wooden triptych and put it at the front of some ecumenical cathedral I could imagine the Presbyterians gathering in front of the image of the Father, Baptists gathering in front of the image of the Son, and Pentecostals gathering in front of the image of the Spirit. It’s not that any of these groups would deny the importance or the existence of those other aspects—Pentecostals talk about Jesus and Presbyterians talk about the Spirit—but each of these groups seems to be more at home with one person of the Trinity than with the other two. So, I’m grateful that I’ve had the chance to spend some time among all three groups, to feel at home with the whole of the Trinity. I can see that if I had only spent time with Presbyterians, or Pentecostals, or Baptists the three-legged stool of my Trinitarian faith might lean dangerously in one direction or the other. And at the extreme I might find that I had little or no regard for one particular aspect of the Trinity—the Holy Spirit for instance. While a three-legged stool can stand even if one leg is shorter than the others it can’t stand on two legs, and certainly not on one.

It was that kind of observation that inspired the Athanasian Creed, one you may not be familiar with. It is attributed to Athanasius of Alexandria, a bishop of the early church who seemed to feel a need to set the Christian record straight on two counts: one, the divinity of Jesus, and two, the doctrine of the Trinity. The Athanasian Creed is short and redundant to the point of being tedious, but it gets its point across. Listen to the

language: “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.” It goes on like that for several paragraphs before concluding with: “So there is One Father, not Three Fathers; one Son, not Three Sons; One Holy Ghost, not Three Holy Ghosts. And in this Trinity none is afore or after Other, None is greater or less than Another, but the whole Three Persons are Co-eternal together, and Co-equal. So that in all things, as is aforesaid, the Unity is Trinity, and the Trinity is Unity.”

Probably even before that conclusion you had gotten the point that the three are one and the one is three, but you may not have gotten the point of getting it. This creed begins with the shocking suggestion that unless you believe in the Trinity you cannot be saved. “Whoever would be saved,” it says, “must believe those things that are common to the Christian faith, and whoever does not will perish everlastingly.” And what are those things? That “we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity.” Although this creed is not binding in any respect—not even among Catholics and certainly not among Baptists—it is important that we pause long enough to note that in the thinking of this early Christian pastor you couldn’t even be saved without a proper Trinitarian faith. That three-legged stool on which you tried to sit would tip over, and dump you into Hell.

Somewhere in the urgent appeal of that pastor is the truth that to ignore any person of the Trinity is to risk great peril. And yet we do it all the time. At my last church we tended to talk a little more about the Father than the Son, and a little more about the Son than the Spirit. Was it because we were embarrassed by the intimacy of

close relationship with Jesus? Was it because we were afraid of the unpredictable power of the Holy Spirit? It's possible. When I was visiting that Pentecostal church as a teenager I prayed to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, but I was more than a little afraid that God might give it to me in the middle of geometry class, and I would jump up on my desk and start speaking in tongues. Being Presbyterian seemed much safer. I could keep God up there, somewhere, in Heaven, and not down there in geometry class. And, frankly, it took me a while to get used to the "Jesus" talk I heard among those Baptist students in college. They seemed a little too comfortable with him, a little too familiar. It wouldn't have hurt any of them, I thought, to show a little more reverence toward God. But in both cases I can see that God was trying to get off that throne I had put him on, "high and lifted up" as it says in that well-known passage from Isaiah. I can see that through those experiences God was trying to come down to my level where I could get to know him, was trying to fill me up with the kind of power I needed to be a Christian. To resist the Father's movement toward me as Son and Spirit would be to resist the full, and intimate, and empowering embrace of the Trinity. And so, over time, as I fell in love with Jesus, as I opened myself to the Spirit, I gave myself up to that embrace, and felt that I had come home at last.

Maybe that's why Jesus told his followers that as they went into all the world making disciples they should baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Maybe he knew that the fullest expression of the Christian life would be found where there was equal emphasis on all three persons of the Trinity. I don't think he would go as far as Athanasius did: I don't think he would say that if you didn't accept the doctrine of the Trinity you would "perish everlastingly." But I think he knew that

everlasting life begins even before we die, and it begins as we come to know and love God as Father, Son, and Spirit. I think Paul knew it, too, and I think that's why he says to his dear friends the Corinthians, at the end of that second letter: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you."

Amen.

—*Jim Somerville, 2012*