

## Trinity Sunday – Brian Hartley

Genesis 1:1-2:4a; 2 Corinthians 13:11-13; Matthew 28:16-20

If my files are correct, this is at least the fifth time since the establishment of St. Paul's that I have been called upon to deliver a sermon on Trinity Sunday. Now, I must confess to always cowering to some extent whenever this day rolls around. This lack of bravery is primarily the result of a traumatizing experience as a first-year seminarian who was asked to deliver the children's sermon on Trinity Sunday—a double-whammy which brings together two of the things preachers fear most, explaining a difficult theological concept and speaking to children. For, as most of you know, with adults you have at least some idea of how they will behave, but when it comes to children all bets are off.

So, during that week of preparation I spent countless hours studying the various Trinitarian controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries and even made myself note cards in order to squeeze out the doctrine in children's terms in the time required. But I was to prove no match for five-year-old Mikey, one of the most gregarious and outspoken of the twenty or so charges for whom I was responsible that morning. When I took my accustomed seat on the steps and beckoned for the children to come forward, Mikey took off like a lightning bolt and was the first to greet me. "Do you know what I did this morning?" the little guy said. "I took a shower with my mom. And do you know what?" Now, whenever a child provides a leading line like this one we are all expected to answer, "Pray tell what, Mikey?" But I was downright scared as to what this five-year-old might have to say—almost as afraid, that is, as his mother who had turned several shades of white and sat rigid and mortified several rows back. I knew at that moment, gone were my hours of preparation, like the soapsuds down the shower drain that morning. The church's understanding of the Trinity, perhaps one of the most important and difficult of theological battles, was being held hostage on that sunshiny day by much more interesting and pressing matters.

Perhaps this explains, at least to some extent, why many of my pastoral colleagues this morning will opt for cashing in the liturgical year for the much more acceptable civic calendar and will use this opportunity to laud the role of fathers—an equally lacking and neglected topic in our culture, yet one not quite so theologically complex. But I think that there are at least three reasons why ignoring the Trinity imperils those of us committed to Christ and the church. First, historically we know that this was one of two key doctrines over which the early church labored for the better part of 150 years in the fourth and fifth centuries. No issue with which we have been engaged in the church's recent memory—whether women's ordination, divorce, or homosexuality—comes close to the importance of this topic or the time the church spent struggling with it. If our ancestors in the faith saw this as one of the key issues of faith worth squaring off over, surely it deserves our attention, as well. Second, the doctrine of the Trinity

forms the “backbone” of all of the early creedal statements—including the Apostles’ or the Nicene Creed. In fact, most churches, including ours recite such a creed regularly in their services of worship on a weekly, if not a daily, basis. As a result, we might just want to pay closer attention to something that we confess so adamantly and participate in so regularly. And, finally, we know that elements of the doctrine continued to be at the heart of later divisions within the church—whether the so-called Monophysite controversy of the fifth century (in which a large portion of the far Eastern church which spoke Syriac found itself ostracized) or the later rupture between East and West in the eleventh century which forever separated those of us in the West who find our origins in the Roman rite from those in the East who worship following the rites of Sts. Basil and Chrysostom. In short, this doctrine lies at the very heart of our identity as Christians.

The interesting thing is that the doctrine is not found in a direct way in Scripture—though it is hinted at both explicitly and implicitly. Two of this morning’s texts provide excellent examples of this: the first, from Paul’s pen, which includes a Trinitarian greeting, and the second the familiar Great Commission passage which links together the post-resurrection Jesus with both the authority of the Father and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Those who insist on a “sola scriptura” approach oftentimes find themselves at something of a cul-de-sac at this point, either having to appeal to a hidden meaning behind the text or trying to reconstruct some kind of mystical apostolic authority separate from the despised classic appeal to the Roman understanding of church tradition. So, in the end, why all the fuss? What is really at stake with the doctrine of Trinity (as I am wont to ask my students)? Why is there a Sunday set apart for focusing on this church doctrine as opposed to most Sundays when we contemplate a teaching of Jesus?

In the little text I have my seniors read each fall, the theologian, Justo Gonzalez, suggests that the doctrine of the Trinity really serves like foul lines on a baseball field to prevent us from wandering too far afield from central truths of the gospel (A Concise History of Christian Doctrine, 84). First, in affirming the oneness of God, the doctrine stands over against an embracing of polytheism. To say that there is one God—Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer—is to align one’s self within the Jewish and Christian traditions which trace their roots to Abraham and refuse to give in to the popular gods of any particular day and age. Second, it means that when we, along with the early church, proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord we are going beyond the claim of him as Savior. For first century Christians, this meant that they could not also say, as was the custom in Roman culture, “Caesar is Lord.” And for us, as John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas, and others have so forcefully reminded us, we cannot salute the American flag and all that it stands for as having primacy in our devotion. Our calling as Christians may oftentimes place us at odds with cultural Christianity when patriotism becomes equated with blatant nationalism. Or, to be even more blunt about it, Christians believe that the primary instrument of God’s saving grace is not the American nation state but the church of Jesus Christ. And the Spirit that was at work in the Old Testament prophets and which so animated the life of Christ still energizes and propels that church—and that selfsame Spirit is nothing less than the spirit of God. And, third, all of our simplistic notions about how to ultimately explain “three-in-one” are

doomed to fail because at the heart of the nature of God lies a mystery. God's presence and action extends well beyond anything we may ask or think or grasp. And, perhaps most ironic of all, God is at work despite our inability to comprehend or explain the Deity in human terms.

But, all of these doctrinal implications being named really don't get to the heart of what is at stake in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century American church, so I would like to propose at least two additional contemporary challenges that we may wish to think about that lie much closer to the concrete reality of worship that we experience here this morning. As we have watched the media circus unfold around us over the past week or so over what has now been dubbed somewhat surreptitiously as "Weinergate," it has prompted a number of folks to begin to pay closer attention to what is happening culturally to us as we adopt oftentimes uncritically the forms of electronic culture which spring up so temptingly all around us. Writing in the New York Times a few days ago, Ross Douthat suggests that the Internet's defining vice is that it appeals to what he calls a "desperate adolescent narcissism,"

([http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/13/opinion/13douthat.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/13/opinion/13douthat.html?_r=1)). "Technology really does affect character," Douthat claims. "Cultures do change from era to era, sometimes for the worse."

Now, while I have no interest in preaching something of a jeremiad this morning, or in suggesting that these are the "worst of times," I do think that narcissism is one of the ultimate vices which stands over against the claim by both Jews and Christians that there is one holy God. In fact, most scholars believe that the opening verses of Genesis which we read today while bearing some resemblance to other Near Eastern creation stories, differ in that they posit this one creator god who is over and above we human creatures. Narcissism inverts this relationship and has us forming god in our own image—the ultimate sin of the people of Israel, according to the Hebrew Scriptures. And, inasmuch as our technology both asserts and encourages such god-like tendencies in the human species it stands in ultimate defiance of the worship of the living God in whom we profess faith through our credal statements.

But lest we wash our hands of such tendencies by falling prey to a false "sacred versus secular" dichotomy this morning, we need to begin to pay more attention to how these narcissistic tendencies are already shaping the church, as well. While the incorporation of Facebook or Twitter may not pose a direct threat to the Christian faith, what we preach, proclaim, and sing (as well as the methods by which we do it) does suggest something about our belief or lack of belief in this one true God. In an article written several years ago by my friend, Lester Ruth (lately Professor of Worship at Asbury and now Professor at Duke Divinity School), pleads to worship leaders and songwriters, "Don't lose the Trinity!" In the opening salvo of his piece, Dr. Ruth writes boldly: "my study of the most used contemporary worship songs in the last fifteen years shows that there is a danger our songs reflect love for a god who does not fit the message of the classic, scriptural Christian faith. I grow fearful," he goes on to say, "that our songs disclose intense feelings but do not worship the god revealed in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. . . if songs have the power to form a people's faith, then we stand at the edge of losing scriptural worship."

Lester's work is based on an intense and detailed study of the top-25 Contemporary Christian worship songs as catalogued from 1989 to 2004. These songs dip dangerously over into what I describe as "Jesus-ology" and largely omit the activity of God as the basis for Christian praise and prayer. They also tend to objectify God and to portray Him in largely passive terms. They turn adoration into an end in itself and instead of suggesting Jesus as the mediator to worship God the Father, lay claim to music as the primary mediating agent by which God is made known. This provides concrete evidence of what I have written about most recently in a paper for the Study Commission on Doctrine to be released at this year's General Conference. There I categorize such an approach to worship and the incipient narration of a truncated gospel as "the sacramentalization of Contemporary Christian music." In short, instead of helping us to love the Triune god, by focusing on such lyrics much of our worship creates an idolatry of the musical worship experience itself.

Today's texts, however, call us back to rethinking what it means to love, worship, and serve the Triune God. Many of us, like little Mikey, would much rather focus on less abstract, more salacious and interesting subjects. But the church reminds us today that at least for one Sunday every year the historic faith in one God—Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer—deserves our full and undivided attention. As T. F. Torrance states it so eloquently in his magisterial book, *The Trinitarian Faith*, "The objective pole of the Church's faith is the truth of God which has seized hold of it in Christ and his Gospel and will not let it go, truth over which it has no control but truth which makes it free and establishes it in the love of God. . . This would hardly be the case if faith were only subjectively grounded in some inner persuasion of the human mind, and not objectively grounded, as it is, in the universally binding reality of God embodied in Christ as his unique self-giving and self-communication to mankind as Lord and Savior. Hence the Church cannot but confess its faith in God, before God, with an unreserved endorsement of belief in the truth of Christ and his Gospel, as the truth with which its very existence is bound up as the Church, the one Body of Christ, and as the saving grace of God which constitutes the very essence of its message and mission," (23).

That is why the doctrine of the Trinity lies at the very heart of the gospel, for without it we would have no reason to be here and to be engaged in such counter-cultural behavior. For it is belief in and worship of the Trinitarian god that marks Christians out as distinctive. To say as we do when we repeat the creed that "we believe" means to stake our very lives, both individual and corporate, on the truth of this Trinitarian faith. And, it is only as we are embraced by that Trinitarian god and baptized into that Trinitarian faith that we begin to recognize the real purpose for which we were created. That purpose is nothing less than participation in the salvific work of God in reconciling all of creation back to God's self. And just as the persons within the Godhead participate in a dynamic relationship centered in love, we, too, are called to participation through our baptism into God's redeeming purposes. That, my friends, is the purpose for which we were created and our life's highest calling. So, as we come to the table of our Lord this morning, let us do so not only in penitence for our idolatrous ways but in thanksgiving to the one god of us all who continues to beckon us into His service. And, may we

come to a new and fresh relationship with God the Father, through Jesus the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.