

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**

Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on May 30, 2010 (Trinity Sunday, Year C)

It's been said that more heresy is preached on Trinity Sunday than any other day of the year. I'm not sure whether or not this is true, but it does highlight the confusion generated by the concept of one God in three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Long theological tomes have been written on the subject. Church councils have been convened on the subject. Christians have been martyred over the subject. And the confusion remains. Human language is always inadequate to explain the fullness of the mystery of God. And the historical debates and controversies make *this*, at least, very clear.

But *talking* about the Trinity only gets us so far. The Trinitarian debates of the fourth century and its byproduct the Nicene Creed are undoubtedly foundational to our understanding of the faith. Through this conversation we know that God is the Father "of all that is seen and unseen." And that "Jesus Christ is the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father." And that the Holy Spirit "proceeds from the Father and the Son." But for us, *talking* about the Trinity is a world apart from *experiencing* the Trinity. Because the Trinity is the fullest expression of God, it isn't just dull, dry doctrine; it's living faith. For God is a dynamic power, a presence bursting with energy; a Creator intimately involved with our everyday lives, a Redeemer who came into the world to save us, and a Sanctifier that breathes holiness into every corner of life. This isn't just theoretical; this is life-giving truth.

So, here's a little secret: the fullest expression of God is not about arcane or complex theological language. It's not about some new-fangled math that claims one plus one plus one equals one. The fullest expression of God is simply this: that God is love. *That's* the essence of God's fullest expression. Again and again the Gospel of John brings home this point: God is, above all, love. And that's what the Trinity is all about.

In a sense, there's nothing simpler or more basic than love. So, maybe we're the ones who make the concept of the Trinity so complex. Maybe it's our sinfulness and brokenness that confuse the divine simplicity of God. Maybe we complicate the fundamental essence of God. God is love, so the Trinity, too, is love.

Which brings us to a question. How do you experience love? How do you know what love looks and feels like? We know love because we are loved or we love others. So it's through community and interaction with others that we experience love. The Trinity, which is ultimately the heart of God, is bound together in community, in a community of love. Because the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – is itself a community. These three persons are in loving relationship and loving community with one another. The ultimate community, perhaps, but just as much a community as your family or this parish. And so the Trinity as the fullest expression of God, models communal love. The difference is that it is a community based *exclusively* on love. In our own communities we certainly strive for loving community. And there are moments when our communities reflect glimpses of this divine love. But we're human. And so, many things thwart our efforts toward fostering loving community. Like pride and self-interest, insecurity and

fear. But rather than despair, the relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit gives us hope. It points to what can potentially be created when people join together in love. And the possibilities are astounding.

About a month ago there was an editorial in the *Boston Globe* by BU religion professor Stephen Prothero based on his new book “*God is Not One.*” The subtitle was classic academic fare: “*The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World--and Why Their Differences Matter.*” In it he argues that it’s not only misleading but dangerous to fall into the trap that suggests that “all religions are the same.” It’s a nice and comforting notion that we all believe in the same God, that we’re all following different paths up the same mountain, and that in the end we’re all going to the same place.

The problem with this idea is that it reduces religion to the least common denominator. If you’ve ever been to a poorly thought out interfaith service you know just how tepid such an approach can be. Rather than note and celebrate the differences between Christianity and Judaism and Islam and Hinduism and Buddhism, they often try to combine everything into an Oprah-like God operating on a creed of “I’m okay, you’re okay, we’re all okay.” And, to me, that doesn’t do God any justice.

This isn’t to say that we or any other single group has a monopoly on religious truth. To proclaim that would be the ultimate in human arrogance. But we can proclaim our understanding as the revealed Truth as we have come to know and experience it. Of course, God can work in other ways but for us the Trinitarian experience of God is the way and the life and the truth whereby no one can come to God the Father, *as we know God*, except through Jesus Christ. That’s not being exclusive; it’s being authentic to our identity as Christians.

The reality is that we don’t believe in the same God as others do. Because the fullness of the God we worship can only be expressed as the interplay of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And that’s a hard pill to swallow for our watered-down cultural notion of God. Religious tolerance is a great virtue and there is no doubt that we can all learn things from the spiritual truths acquired in different traditions. But to live lives of religious integrity we have to recognize the differences – not only that we come to different conclusions but also that we ask different questions and are concerned with different issues.

Bearing this in mind, the relationship of the three persons of the Trinity is not a remote model for us. It’s not something we stare at and strive for. The Trinity’s love must be shared. It needs an object for its love. And that’s where you and I come in. In a very personal and unique way, we are the object of this Trinitarian love. God doesn’t just love in the abstract; God loves us. That’s the miracle of the Holy Trinity of God. It exists to share God’s divine love with you and me. And it’s why we can say with such conviction that “God is love.”

The point of Trinity Sunday is not to honor doctrinal complexities. It is to rejoice in God’s love for us; to revel in the unique ways in which we as Christians experience the love of the Triune God in our lives; and to remember our charge to share God’s love with others.