

Trinitarian Community

June 12, 2022

God the Father

As we approach Father's Day next weekend, I recall a gift I gave my dad a few years after finishing seminary. Money was pretty tight for me, whereas dad was at the stage in life that if he wanted anything he went out and got it, so thinking of gifts for him was a particular challenge.

After quite a bit of deliberation, I went back through my computer and printed all of my sermons in which I had used stories of him and his life as an example, all of the times that I had used stories of him and his life to try to help people wrap their minds around who God is, how God works, and what it means to live a life following Jesus.

The collection was extensive. He never said a word to me about the gift, but when we were cleaning things out after he died, I found it, dog eared, in his bedside table. I was truly blessed to have a father who could help me understand our Divine Father, and because I know that isn't always the case, I am even more grateful for his witness and love.

Trinity Sunday

Churches that try to follow the Liturgical Calendar celebrate Trinity Sunday this week, the week after Pentecost. It's pretty esoteric, actually. Even though most people who are raised in Christianity will, if asked to define God, use the word Trinity or will talk about Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the idea of the Trinity is inscrutable enough that few will go any farther. You'll notice that I say the "idea" of the Trinity, not the "doctrine" of the Trinity. I say that explicitly because every time we try to name God, to define God, we are going to fall short.

Theologian Sandra Schneiders puts it quite bluntly, "God is not two dudes and a bird." The church, in declaring the Trinity doctrine and then exclusively using "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" language to name the aspects of the Trinity, have, in short, created an idol.

Sadly, when pushed on this, many conservative churches double down. Elizabeth Johnson, a phenomenal theologian, wrote a book about the Trinity a few years ago called, "The Quest for the Living God." She was blasted by conservative churches for saying that all ways that we name and describe God are metaphors.

Of course they are! This is God we're talking about. How did our gathering hymn go? Immortal, invisible, God only wise? The very notion of God IS that it is so much larger, so much broader, so much more complex than our mere human brains can comprehend that everything we say about God is going to be partial, a component, an aspect. In short, our God language, including that of the Trinity, is a metaphor.

This thinking is bolstered by the UCC's notion that "God is still speaking," that God continues to reveal God's self and interact with us and, therefore, new expressions of the divine are continually adding to what we know about God. In fact, this is further backed up by our Gospel reading, where we read of Jesus saying in John 16:12, "I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot understand them now." The reality is that ever since the enlightenment,

Christians have treated the Trinity as a definition of God, instead of a description. While describing God as “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” is good, doing so exclusively has left us with a handful of problems.

First, those of us who were fathered well can start to wrap our minds around God as father, but for those who were not fathered well, or whose fathers were even hurtful or worse, this image not only doesn’t work, it can do harm. For some, Father means cold, callous, even abusive or absent, and naming God exclusively as father then carries those traits over to God as well.

Additionally, the exclusive use of “Father” to describe God has been central to the exclusion of women in roles in the church. I’m not only talking about churches who don’t have female clergy. The exclusive use of male language to describe God trickles down into agency, basic human dignity, and how women are regarded in every other way.

Redeeming the Trinity

All of this is to say that, while exclusively using “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” to name the Divine has its problems, Trinity is still an abundantly helpful construct to help us wrap our minds around it. Once we’ve loosened our grip on “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” as definitions of God, we can explore other metaphors within Trinity.

Let’s try Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier. This is one that I use very often in baptism. Instead of using gender language, it names three core actions of the divine: God is our Creator – exists beyond time, is the source of all that is and all that ever will be. God is our Redeemer – remember, to “redeem” is to bring back, to return, so God as Redeemer is the function of God who helps us to come back, come back home, come back to who we are created to be, come back from the ways we have strayed, from our faults, our sins, wayward ways. And God as our Sanctifier blesses us, giving us energy and divine wisdom and courage.

Or, how about thinking of Trinity as “What was, what is, and what will be”? Or as the sun, sunshine, and the energy that sunshine manifests in plants and in us? I’ll never forget the first time I heard this concept of the Trinity. It made so much sense to me – God as the source being the sun, God on earth in and amongst us as the rays, God which infuses us and animates us as energy.

Conclusion

Friends, as we try to wrap our minds around the concept of Trinity, it’s wise to remember that talk of God is all image, all metaphor, all “through a glass darkly.” Some of the brightest minds in human history have spent their entire lives trying to wrap themselves around the ultimate reality of God. How do the aspects of the Trinity interact? Is one before the others? Is one superior or are they co-equal? If these questions are your thing, I can recommend a couple of really fine books on the subject.

Friends, as we celebrate Trinity Sunday, we remember that, while the way we name God has ramifications, it will always be inadequate. In all, this truth remains: God invites us to love other human beings in the same way that we are loved by God – that is, by loving our neighbors as our very selves. This practice came out loud and clear in this church this past week, as we’ve worked

to support and nurture and console one another at the death of our colleague and friend, Christopher. And it is our prayer that this church will be a manifestation of the triune God in the lives of the eight people who are joining our church today.

No matter how we name God, this is the deepest lesson for us on this Trinity Sunday. How we name things shapes how we behave. And so, it is my fervent prayer this week that in your minds both “Trinity” and “church” will be synonyms for love.

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Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-30; John 16:12-15
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