

Isaiah 6:1-8  
Canticle 13  
Romans 8:12-17  
John 3:1-17

**Trinity Sunday**  
June 7, 2009

In the name of the One, Holy, and Almighty God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Trinity Sunday! The sermon most preachers dread all year: how do we even begin to articulate the mystery of the One Almighty God as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – three distinct persons, all of the same substance. This concept of three beings of the “same substance,” *homoousios* in Latin, was fought over furiously in the early Ecumenical Councils of the Church, and continues to spill blood today. At the same time, it’s a concept that for others is a complete non-issue – the three persons of the Trinity are a natural and obvious thing to many Christians. It makes complete interior sense to those of us who have had the privilege of growing up looking at life through that lens. I think we can all look at our lives and identify actions of the Father, actions of Jesus Christ, and actions of the Holy Spirit: all the hand of God Almighty, yet with recognizably distinct characteristics. I think it is a worthy effort *anytime* we wrestle with concepts that are difficult to articulate, and especially so when it’s a core concept in our belief as Christians of the Trinity. It’s a part of our Creed, after all – the summary of what we believe - so even more worthy of our efforts to try to understand this concept of our “*God in Three Persons, Blessed Trinity*” which is - for us - both natural and second-nature, and yet rightly and mysteriously far beyond our full understanding.

Theologians have been grappling with this concept of the Trinity for centuries. St. Patrick - the 4<sup>th</sup> century Patron Saint of Ireland, one of the early champions of Trinitarian belief, and the author of our opening hymn (at the 10:15 service tomorrow/this morning) - is known for his use of the three-leaved Irish shamrock to illustrate how one entity, all of the same substance, could have three distinct parts. Others have used the image of water as one substance - frozen, liquid, or turned into steam - to illustrate three different forms of one substance. There are as many attempts at describing the Trinity as there are stars in the sky, so you can imagine the challenge I encountered one evening in New York City at a Turkish restaurant, deep in conversation with my dear friend Fahri - a devout Sunni Muslim, and one of the most deeply faithful persons I’ve ever known. Fahri was the person who guided me and several seminary friends with such caring and grace through a tour of his native Turkey, and both Fahri and I, being devout persons of what some call oppositional faiths, found real joy and hope in discovering the abundance of common ground we share, as well as challenge in discussing the main theological differences between us. The one is, of course, that Jesus - whom Muslims love and revere devoutly, and of whom the largest chapter in the Qur’an is written - *is* considered to be the holy and blessed prophet of God and the final judge of all creation, yet is not considered by Muslims to be the *final* prophet. The other great difference has to do with – you guessed it – the Trinity. And this was the subject of Fahri’s question at the table.

You see, it is so hard to grasp the concept of “three persons within one substance” that the Muslim religion considers it to be polytheism: they believe in the One God of Abraham, just as we do; yet they worry that to believe in the Trinity is to believe in more than One God. All three of the Abrahamic Faiths – Muslims, Jews, and Christians – are devout monotheists,

and yet this incorrect perception, along with the concept of scriptural inerrancy taken out of historical context, have been used as weapons for “*religious*” extremists for centuries. Just as devout Christians do not support violence, neither of course do devout Jews or Muslims, and all three find it equally abhorrent to hear of extremists calling themselves Christians or Muslims or Jews. The way that the heart of a Christian hurts when we see the cross disrespected by anyone, or the consecrated Host accidentally fall to the floor, is the same pain felt in a Muslim’s heart at the thought of not believing in the One Holy and Living God, or in a Jewish person’s heart upon hearing the name of God written out, or spoken aloud. We all have the same deep and intense reverence for the Holy, expressed in forms that can seem very different. Hmmm...three forms, same devotion... But back to the Turkish restaurant, in my first attempt to describe the Trinity completely from scratch.

You see, Fahri and I had already had many earlier conversations about the common ground we shared in our deep love of God, and our mutual need for devotional practice. We were delighted to discover that we had the same rhythm of prayer through the day – the beautiful Muslim call from the minarets to their “five times prayer” matches, in time and intention, the chiming of Christian chapel bells for Anglican Daily Office. We had both agreed that Almighty God, the unknowable and ultimate mystery, could never be confined to any single gender or time or space. And I had shared with him my perception that the Jewish and Muslim concept of God was recognizable to me as the Christian Old Testament God of Law: one of impossible rules, harsh repercussions and final and eternal damnation; wrath and vengeance and frustration with the human race, who were showing little hope of following the number one rule of every Holy Law Book: to Love God.

And so, on this night, I began describing the Trinity by beginning with the *second* person of the Trinity – Jesus. God’s limitless self, born incarnate into the world to try to teach us by the rule of Love, instead of the rule of Law. I told him about how Jesus taught us to think of God as a closer presence, as a parent, and taught us how to pray in this new relationship. I described to my friend the strong comfort and reassurance of Jesus’ constant Presence, of his incarnation making God’s limitless and unimaginable self into a form we could relate to: “God with skin on.” God with a hand we can hold, God whom we can walk beside, in quiet or in conversation. God whom we can totally rant with in anger, or dance with in the kitchen with joy. God with feet at which we can curl up and rest, or lay at and weep. God with wounds which hurt, and were necessary, just like ours. I spoke of my deep gratitude for the opportunity to grapple deeply in theological study, coming to my understanding that all of God’s beautiful creation, all of God’s children, are given their judgement, their purification, and their welcome home into eternal life with Jesus the Christ, *through* his death and resurrection, “*in order that the world might be saved through him,*” as our Gospel points out today. *Through* the door opened by his saving reach on the Cross, all will meet him and know him *in time*, and I shared my sadness that so many would not know the comfort of his near Presence *until* then. I told Fahri that I was so grateful for his personal goodness and courage in living such a faithful life in a way that, to me, seemed “all alone” without Jesus; and that I didn’t think I would be strong enough to bear that.

Then we turned to the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. (It was a very long dinner!) I turned to scripture to show what Jesus taught his disciples about the coming of the Holy Spirit. He was very clear about it, describing that he needed to ascend and return to the Godhead so that this Spirit could arrive, bringing to them God’s power to heal, and preach,

and teach; bringing them God's power to bless, and to sanctify, and to pass on God's Spirit through the laying on of hands. I told him the story of how the disciples were told to wait after Jesus' ascension for the arrival of this Spirit, which came on the day that we now call Pentecost – the day that the Holy Spirit melted all divisions, made all languages understandable, and all hearts one.

Fahri asked about the meaning of Holy Communion, and I explained that in the Eucharist we do what he asked us to do at his last meal: by the power of the Holy Spirit, we remember him: we re-assemble, re-create, the real Presence of his blessed Body and Blood in the sanctification of the bread and the wine. We take his Presence in, and we become what we eat: we become Christ's Body in this time and place, and are sanctified by it, strengthened to bear it out into the world, as he commanded us to do.

I told my friend how I believe that we are all born of the Spirit, and that our work on earth is to evolve into being able to fully love God and each other - how Jesus taught us to honor our beautiful and God-given diversity, and to honor God's creation in *each* of us. Fahri and I talked about the whole concept of Oneness – about how what hurts one of us hurts all of us – and I wondered to myself about the Oneness of the Trinity, imagining that Jesus' terrible hurts had to have been suffered terribly by the Father and by the Spirit as well. I thought of our hopes, as Muslims and Christians and Jews and the myriad of God's people on earth, for peace and Oneness, amidst the sad history of the human race - of all the pain we inflict on each other - and wondered how it must appear to Almighty God: like one huge wounded organism, lashing out in frustration and pain, not knowing that it's inflicting all that hate and hurt upon itself.

It was a long evening at that Turkish restaurant. I remember that I didn't eat much in the urgency of trying to communicate this challenging concept of the Holy Trinity to my friend. We spoke deep into the night, and I know that my own faith and theology were clarified by the work of putting it all into words. I think that the practice of articulating what we believe is an important piece of faithful formation, and I urge each of you to take some time to think on these things.

When I think of the work of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, I think of the day of my ordination to the priesthood, especially today when we hear St. Patrick's Breastplate, the passage from Isaiah 6, and the Veni Sancte Spiritus – all traditionally heard at ordinations for their invocation and transmission of the Holy Spirit. The sanctuary was so filled that day with the power of God: truly God's robes filled the temple. The Holy Spirit was in the house, called by hearts united as one – you were here, and Fahri was here, and Ozgar and Nebi, and other beloved friends from different devout traditions - and it was like I picture Pentecost to have been: not so much about languages being understood but about unity, about the dropping away of divisions, and about the awesome power of the One Almighty and Living God.

We heard these words of Isaiah on ordination day, and we heard them again today, describing the awesome presence of Almighty God, filling the temple with the hem of his robe, seraphim hovering and singing “Holy, Holy, Holy.”  
Isaiah continued:

*“Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”*

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit claim and call *each one* of us to go, in the name of Almighty God. So go: be the person of God you were ordained to be; think hard; pray harder; wrestle with what you believe, learn to articulate it. Respect the same worthy effort in all of God’s religions; in all of God’s beautiful diverse people. We as faithful Christians must be the best Christians we can possibly be: sent off in our own different ways to share the incredible Good News we’ve received. We as People of the Cross have the honor and responsibility of giving praise and thanks, on behalf of the *whole world*, to Almighty God for the immeasurable love of the Father, for the saving grace of our Lord and King Jesus Christ, and for the awesome power of the Holy Spirit.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be; world without end. Amen.

Alleluia!

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