

Illustration from the Children's Sermon

A group of blind men heard that a strange animal, called an elephant, had been brought to their town, but none of them knew what an elephant looked like. Out of curiosity, they said: "We must inspect it by touch because that is how we will be able to know what it looks like." So, they went to the place where the elephant was and when they found it each felt it from the place they were standing around the animal. The first person, whose hand landed on the trunk, said "An elephant is like a thick snake." The second one reached for its ear and said that it seemed "like a kind of fan." The next reached out for the animal's leg and said "the elephant is a pillar, like a tree trunk." The one who placed his hand on the elephant's side said, "this animal is like a wall." The fourth man grabbed hold of the elephant's tail and described it as a rope. While the last one felt the tusk of the elephant and said that it was "hard and smooth like a spear

Just as each man had a different understanding of what an elephant looks like, we may have different experiences of God. The Bible calls God *Father, Jesus, and Holy Spirit* which the church understands as the "proper" name for God. But throughout history, faithful people have called God by descriptive names such as *my rock, a mighty fortress* and *the Most High*. Jesus is called *the Lamb of God, the Good Shepherd*, and uses a variety of metaphors including a comparison of himself to a mother hen gathering in her chicks. Each names tells us something about God and how God relates to people.

+ + +

I have to say that I think Holy Trinity Sunday is probably the weirdest church festival of the year. It is the only day set aside to celebrate a church doctrine. It's about a concept, not an event or a person, but an idea. It feels like a "Hallmark Holiday," except nobody ever sends *Happy Holy Trinity Cards*.

+ + +

If you search through the Bible you won't find the word "Trinity" in any part of the book. Today's gospel is a rarity in that it shows Jesus talking about all three persons of the Trinity in a single story. Yet, it's not a theological discussion on how it is that one God is in three persons. Jesus doesn't explain how the Trinity works. He just talks about the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

On Holy Trinity Sunday in 1522, Martin Luther began his sermon by saying,

Today we celebrate the festival of the Holy Trinity, to which we must briefly allude, so that we may not celebrate it in vain. It is indeed **true** that the name "Trinity" is nowhere to be found in the Holy Scriptures, but has been conceived and invented by humans.

For this reason, it sounds somewhat cold and we had better speak of "God" than of the "Trinity."

So you see, I'm not the only one to struggle with how to preach about "a concept" and not just a concept, but a **tough** concept.

+ + +

More than a thousand years before Luther, in the fourth century, the church spent more than a hundred years having meetings and debates about the nature and essence of God. People kept trying to define who Jesus was in relation to the Father and how did the Holy Spirit fit into the whole thing? Midway through the process, the bishops of the church met for the Council of Nicaea, which is when they came up with the Nicene Creed, which describes Jesus as "God of God, Light of Light,

very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.” While the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father and the Son” and is “with” the Father and the Son.

Later in that same century, Augustine of Hippo wrote the definitive study on the topic entitled *On the Trinity*. Jaroslav Pelikan, who was one of the great church historians and theologians of the twentieth century had this to say about Augustine’s study.

St. Augustine, who wrote probably the most important book about the Holy Trinity ever written, an enormous work in abstract Latin exploring if we are created in the image of God and God is Trinity, then how is the human soul a Trinity? And then looking at all kinds of biblical passages and all that. And at the end of this enormous work, on which he spent so many years, [Augustine] said, "**We have said this not in order to say something, but in order not to remain altogether silent.**"

Jaroslav’s point was that St. Augustine, the man who literally wrote the book on the Trinity, said, “Well we couldn’t say nothing about the Trinity- so this is what we came up with.

We don’t really understand how the Trinity all comes together. In that same 1522 sermon, Luther said

“This word [trinity] signifies that there are three persons in God. It is a heavenly mystery which the world cannot understand. I have often told you that this, as well as every other article of faith, must not be based upon reason or comparisons, but must be understood and established by means of passages from the Scriptures, for God has the only perfect knowledge and knows how to speak concerning himself.

In other words, we are never going to understand the triune God, because God is the only one who can really explain how God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

It’s a holy secret. It’s a mystery. In this life, we are never going to really get how it works. And that’s okay. If someone tells you that they do understand how God can be three persons and yet one God, they’re probably fooling with you or they are simply mistaken.

Luther also wrote, "To try to deny the Trinity endangers your salvation, to try to comprehend the Trinity endangers your sanity."

So at the risk of endangering our sanity, what can we say about all these things?

Professor Karoline Lewis has suggested that “maybe, the Trinity is not so much about who God is, but reveals more **about, to what** God is committed.”

The **who** of God, is that God is Father and Creator. God is Jesus the Redeemer and God is Spirit. But God’s energy and force and passion is about relationships. God is committed to making connections. Lewis goes on to say, relationship is “at the core of who God is, but also, it’s at the core of what God does, what God needs the church to be.” And for me, that’s something worth celebrating as a churchly festival.

If Trinity Sunday is just a day to remember century old arguments made by theologians from long ago, that sounds like a colossal bore, but to celebrate that at the heart of what the church strives to be is relationships - if today is about celebrating the connections we have with God and the connections we have with each other – that’s worth talking about. No more theological Hallmark Holiday but a time to lift up the blessedness of seeing that God has created a tapestry that includes us and all of humanity.

The Bible tells us that from the very beginning, God was creating. And that Jesus the Word was a partner in that movement and activity. And the Spirit, the breath of God, blew over the earth as all things came into being. What a partnership! Together Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer weave a dance of love that is a complete. Perfect. Creative. Powerful. It is as the psalmist writes,

“When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,

the moon and the stars you have set in their courses,
what are mere mortals that you should be mindful of them,
human beings that you should care for them?"

And yet, this God whose name is chanted in the heavens, wants to be in relationship with you and me.

+ + +

Later this morning we will serve as sponsors and witnesses to the baptism of Alijah James Samuels. He will be bathed in the water and in the Spirit of God. He will be invited to be in relationship with the whole church.

You and me and Alijah – we have been embraced by the everlasting love of God. We are proclaimed to be, the treasured possession of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Now, I don't know how that works either, but I believe that it does.

You and I are treasured. Beloved. Cherished.

God is committed to being in relationship with us.

+ + +

Last Saturday, the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church in the United States, Michael Curry preached at the royal wedding. And it was a good sermon – especially for a wedding. One of the things Bishop Curry said was this,

Someone once said that Jesus began the most revolutionary movement in human history. A movement grounded in the unconditional love of God for the world - and a movement mandating people to live that love, and in so doing to change not only their lives but the very life of the world itself. I'm talking about power. Real power. Power to change the world.

I don't know how often brides and grooms are challenged to change the world, but it was a preaching opportunity that couldn't be ignored. The challenge for the church has been and always will be trying to figure out how to actively live out its relationship with God as a corporate entity and as individuals. Our relationship with God is not supposed to be like the one you have with your mother's cousin who lives in South America and that you have met a few times at a family reunion with a lot of other people around. God does not want to say, "Oh I remember you. The last time we talked you were only this big. Instead we are called to daily prayer and regular worship. We are meant to be actively showing our love to the world by caring for the poor. Working for justice. Feeding the hungry. Visiting the sick and imprisoned.

For Christians, these are meant to be normative practices. Lifting up others with the things that we do and say, with the way that we are related and connected, that is the way of love.

I have two quotes that are on my computer monitor right now. They are posted where I see them nearly every day. The first says, "The Torah is very clear that compassion is required above all else. Leviticus 19:18 commands us to love our neighbor as our self. We are to make our neighbor's dignity as precious to us as our own." And the second one says, "It is time to stop playing footsie with God."

The love that we have for God and our neighbors should be demonstrable. Unmissable. Obvious. Clear. Nobody should wonder about our motivations or our actions. We are Christians. We are in relationship with a God who loves us and calls us to love the rest of the world.

We need to stop playing footsie with God.