

Psalm 8
Trinity Sunday

Romans 5:1-11

June 16, 2019

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

THE MYSTERY OF THE TRINITY

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In 1824, Henry Moore published a book entitled *The Life of Mrs. Mary Fletcher: Consort and Relict of the Rev. John Fletcher, Vicar of Madely*. John Fletcher was a contemporary of John Wesley, a key interpreter of Wesleyan theology, and one of Methodism's first great theologians. Henry Moore was also John Wesley's biographer. In the book about Mrs. Fletcher is this entry for April 3:

"Last Friday Mr. Wesley came. It was a time of hurry, but also of profit above any time I ever had with him before. I could not but discern a great change. His souls seems far more sunk into God, and such an unction attends his word, that each sermon was indeed spirit and life. In preaching on the Trinity, he observed, it was our duty to believe according to the Word of God; but we were not called to comprehend; that was impossible. Bring me, he said, a worm that can comprehend a man, and I will show you a man that can comprehend God."¹

Today is Trinity Sunday on the church calendar. We stand on the threshold of the six month season in the church known as "Ordinary Time."

"Ordinary" here doesn't mean unimportant, but rather standard, usual, or typical. In other words, Sunday by Sunday we worship God and celebrate the life and ministry of Jesus Christ and the opportunities we have in the church to serve God and neighbor.

Trinity Sunday is the only day in the church year in which we celebrate a Christian doctrine rather than an event, such as Jesus' birth or death or resurrection. Ironically and interestingly, this "day of doctrine" is really all about relationships and reconciliation. If we spend our time and energy trying to "explain" the doctrine of the Trinity, we will surely miss and misunderstand the depth and mystery of God's love for us in Jesus Christ, poured into our hearts through God's Holy Spirit.

N.T. Wright is one of the world's preeminent New Testament scholars, a retired Anglican bishop, and professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. You would think if anyone could "explain" the idea of the Trinity, it would be Dr. Wright. However, as the margin note next to the Opening Sentences in today's bulletin indicates, the doctrine of the Trinity is at once mysterious and inviting to us as believers. I want to share with you N.T. Wright's more extensive thought about the Trinity.

He writes, "In the church's year, Trinity Sunday is the day when we stand back from the extraordinary sequence of events that we've been celebrating for the previous five months — Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost — and when we rub the sleep from our eyes and discover what the word 'god'

might actually mean. These events function as a sequence of well-aimed hammer-blows which knock at the clay jars of the gods we want, the gods who reinforce our own pride or prejudice, until they fall away and reveal instead a very different god, a dangerous god, a subversive god, a god who comes to us like a blind beggar with wounds in his hands, a god who comes to us in wind and fire, in bread and wine, in flesh and blood: a god who says to us, ‘You did not choose me; I chose you.’”

Wright continues, “You see, the doctrine of the Trinity, properly understood, is as much a way of saying ‘we don’t know’ as of saying ‘we do know.’ To say that the true God is Three and One is to recognize that if there is a God then of course we shouldn’t expect him to fit neatly into our little categories. If he did, he wouldn’t be God at all, merely a god, a god we might perhaps have wanted. The Trinity is not something that the clever theologian comes up with as a result of hours spent in the theological laboratory, after which he or she can return to announce that they’ve got God worked out now, the analysis is complete, and here is God neatly laid out on a slab. The only time they laid God out on a slab he rose again in three days afterwards.”

Finally, he says, “On the contrary: the doctrine of the Trinity is, if you like, a signpost pointing ahead into the dark, saying: ‘Trust me; follow me; my love will keep you safe.’ Or, perhaps better, the doctrine of the Trinity is a signpost pointing into a light which gets brighter and brighter until we are dazzled and blinded, but which says: ‘Come, and I will make you children of light.’ The doctrine of the Trinity affirms the rightness, the propriety, of speaking intelligently that the true God must always transcend our grasp of him, even our most intelligent grasp of him.”²

Here’s a thought experiment for this Trinity Sunday. Think of some fundamental, bedrock belief you have held onto throughout your life. It might be an article of religious faith, but it doesn’t have to be. Whatever you choose has been part of the foundation of your life. It has determined your life perspective. It has guided your life choices. It has, in many ways, defined who you are and what you do with your life.

Now, imagine that you have a life experience or a series of experiences that shed a new light on this core belief. It’s not that you abandon or reject your fundamental life perspective, but now you are faced with new realities that cause you to reevaluate what you’ve always known to be true and meaningful in your life. How do you suppose you would handle such a revelation and challenge?

When I think of the doctrine of the Trinity, that’s what comes to mind. You won’t find a single instance of the word “Trinity” anywhere in the New Testament. What you will find are stories of faithful people encountering the power and presence of God in their lives and wrestling with what that new thing God is doing means for their own lives and for the world.

Jesus’ disciples were good, faithful Jews. Their bedrock conviction — which had been taught to them from childhood — is found in the great *Shema* in Deuteronomy 6:4-5: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” That’s why the first commandment is “You shall have no other gods before me.” (Exo-

dus 20:3) The belief and trust in one God made the Jewish people different from all other people and religions of their time.

So, how do you suppose the faithful Jewish disciples dealt with an increasing awareness that Jesus was the Son of God, that he *was* God? They heard his teachings. They saw his healings. They experienced his power in their lives. They believed, even when their religious leaders accused Jesus of blasphemy when he talked about God the Father.

Then the power of the Holy Spirit fell upon the same disciples, just as Jesus had promised. And they came to know the love and grace and mercy and power of God the Father and God the Son in an intimate way that created the church and sent them out to proclaim that very same love and grace and mercy and power. That's exactly what Paul writes about in Romans 5: We are put back in a right relationship with God because of God's love which has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. What God has done for us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and in the gift of the Holy Spirit is why we come here today to worship and lift our voices to sing, "Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty! God in three persons, blessed Trinity!"

As N.T. Wright says, "The Trinity is not something that the clever theologian comes up with as a result of hours spent in the theological laboratory." Another former professor at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, Dr. Donald Baillie, published his influential book *God Was in Christ* in 1948. Despite being an esteemed professor of divinity at St. Mary's College at St. Andrews, his "explanation" of the Trinity is no dry intellectual exercise. He wrote about the encounters of the early Christians that led them to confess their faith in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. He said, "The doctrine of the Trinity sums up the gospel by telling us that the God of grace, who was revealed through the Incarnation and Pentecost as the One who paradoxically works in us what he demands of us, is the same from all eternity and for ever more; so . . . Christians can sing: 'Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost: as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end.'"³

And sing we do! On every Lord's Day, but especially on this Trinity Sunday. . .

* We sing "Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty! God in three persons, blessed Trinity!" as we begin our worship.

* We sing "Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost!" in response to God's mercy and love in our lives, which we know through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Or, as Paul writes in this morning's epistle lesson, "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us."

* We sing "Of the Father's love begotten, ere the worlds began to be . . . Christ, to thee with God the Father, and, O Holy Ghost, to thee, evermore and evermore!"

* We sing "Praise God from whom all blessings flow . . . Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost" as we give thanks for all of God's blessings and his love that has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

* We affirm our faith in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord and in the Holy Ghost.”

* We baptize “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

* And every Sunday morning we leave worship with these words in our hearts and ears: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you. Amen.”

Augustine of Hippo, one of the greatest Christian theologians from the 4th and 5th centuries, spent, according to some estimates, up to thirty years writing his book called *On the Trinity*. There is a story about Augustine walking on the seashore one day, deep in thought about the Trinity. He came upon a little boy who was running back and forth from the water to a hole in the sand, with a seashell in his hand. Augustine watched the little boy carry water from the waves and dump it in the hole he had dug.

Augustine asked the little boy, “What are you doing?” The little boy told him, “I’m going to pour the entire ocean into this hole.” Augustine said, “That is impossible, my dear child. The sea is so great and the shell and the hole are so little.” The little boy looked at the great thinker and theologian and said, “This is true. It would be easier and quicker to draw all of the water out of the sea and fit it into this hole than for you to fit the mystery of the Trinity and His Divinity into your little intellect; for the Mystery of the Trinity is greater and larger in comparison with your intelligence than is the vast ocean in comparison with this little hole.” Then the little boy vanished.

Who was the little boy? Tradition says God sent an angel to teach Augustine a lesson about intellectual pride. Others say the little boy was the Christ child himself who reminded Augustine of the limits of our human understanding when it comes to understanding the mysteries of the faith.⁴ At the end of thirty years’ work and fifteen volumes on the Trinity, Augustine’s final words in his work are, “O Lord the one God, God the Trinity, whatever I have said in these books that is of Yours, may they acknowledge who are Yours; if anything of my own, may it be pardoned by You and by those who are Yours. Amen.”⁵

The apostle Paul writes, “since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ . . . because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been give to us.” (Romans 5:1, 5) That’s really what the doctrine of the Trinity is all about. We use the doctrine to contemplate important questions such as Who is Jesus Christ? and What is the relationship between God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit? and What does it mean to profess faith in one God, three persons?

But in its essence, the doctrine of the Trinity is about love, and what is more mysterious than love? In his well-known devotional book called *The Imitation of Christ*, the late-medieval theologian Thomas a Kempis wrote, “Of what use is it to discourse learnedly on the Trinity, if you lack humility and therefore displease the Trinity . . . I would far rather feel contrition than be able to define it. If you knew the whole Bible by heart, and all of the teachings of the philosophers, how would this help you without the grace and love of God?”⁶

In his first letter, John writes about “abiding in God.” Although there is no explicit doctrine of the Trinity laid out in the New Testament, John’s words express very well the core meaning of the Trinity for your life and mine:

“Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him. And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.” (1 John 3:21-24)

Let us pray: In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

NOTES

¹Quoted by Henry Moore in *The Life of Mrs. Mary Fletcher: Consort and Elict Of The Rev. John Fletcher, Vicar of Madely* (Published and sold by J. Kershaw, 1824), p. 239. Found at www.churchhealthwiki.wordpress.com.

²N.T. Wright, in *For All God’s Worth: True Worship and the Calling of the Church* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), p. 24.

³Cited in William E. Phipps, “The Trinity — The Triune God — the doctrine of the Trinity is not irrational,” at www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/trinity/

⁴The Mystery of the Trinity, “The Vision of St. Augustine,” at www.olmlaycarmelites.org.

⁵“On the Trinity (Book XV),” at www.newadvent.org.

⁶Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. Leo Sherley Poole (Harmondsworth, 1953), p. 27.