

Holy Trinity as All Our ‘Beloved Community’

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
The First Sunday after Pentecost: Trinity Sunday – Year A

In the name of God: “Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend.” Amen.—*The Hymnal*, no. 388, “O Worship the King,” v.5

It’s Trinity Sunday! Blessed Trinity Day to you! You know, however you say it—‘Father, Son, and Holy Spirit;’ or ‘Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier’—however you say it, it’s our chance to focus on God as Trinity; God not only as Unity, but also as comm-unity; as “God in three Persons,” the classic hymn says (Hymn 362 in our hymn book, *The Hymnal 1982*): “God in three Persons, blessed Trinity.”

Now, how can that be a blessing for us today? How can knowing God as community—as a community of three Persons—bless us today? Well, let me show you a contrasting view about today’s observance of Trinity Sunday. It’s the contrast that I invoked just a few seconds ago, in my invocation for this homily, when I prayed:

In the name of God: “Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend.”

Of course, you notice right away that there are 4 members of that divine community. But you wouldn’t necessarily know where that quotation came from. It’s from Hymn no. 388 in our hymnal; at the end of verse 5 in that beloved hymn, “O Worship the King, All Glorious Above.” But just like the Trinitarian hymns that we sing today, most of the hymn, “O Worship the King,” is about things that are “all glorious above.”

Only in that final verse, with the beginning of verse 5, do we turn toward our very human experience of living with ‘things below.’ It’s there in verse 5 that we show up as, “Frail children of dust, and feeble as frail.” Yes, that’s how we get represented in the divine scheme of things.

Frail children of dust, and feeble as frail, in [God] do we trust, nor find thee to fail; thy mercies how tender, how firm to the end, our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend. (Robert Grant, 1833)

It’s this evocation of divine tenderness, of merciful, reliable care and protection, and even of intimacy and friendship, that I feel called upon to highlight for us today. How can we be blessed on this Trinity Sunday with a revelation of God as sustaining us in a beloved community that is intimate and friendly? Yes, we hear a lot on Trinity Sunday about God as “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” and even God as our “Maker, Defender, and Redeemer.” All of those are the right and true things to observe on this First Sunday after Pentecost; they are indeed the trinitarian high points of today’s observance. But by contrast, what kind of blessing might we receive if we evoke as well a more intimate access to God as ‘friend’ and as ‘beloved community?’

Now in that first chapter of Genesis humans are created along with the animals. But notice that God makes us

more than the animals: "a little lower than the angels," as the Psalm says (Ps. 8.5). And here is the way our Genesis reading says it:

God created humanity in the divine image,
in God's own image God created them;
male and female they were created in the image of God. [My paraphrase]

But then a tragic fate befalls God's good creation. In the second chapter of Genesis we're told the story of our fall from grace. It's a story about how human beings have been fundamentally and universally deceived by a spiritual rebel. He is an agent of evil in the Bible story, in partnership with a counterfeit 'father' whom the Gospel of John calls "the father of lies" and "a murderer from the beginning" (John 8:44).

That counterfeit spirit in the world lies to human beings throughout history. It is the 'power and principality' that misleads us to believe that we can 'live and move, and have our being and dominion' on our own terms. It is the source of our false consciousness and our fall from grace, and has succeeded in alienating us from God and from one another so that we exist as exiles us from our heavenly commission. In our fallen state we live in a world of domination instead of 'dominion.' Dominating or being dominated by others becomes normal, from everyday relationships to the most horrific forms of war and violence.

But God promises that one day a human will come to defeat evil and death at their source and to open up the way to [our renewed heavenly commission]. And this promise reaches its fulfillment in Jesus.

When we're introduced to Jesus, he's a human, but he's also way more. We're told that, in Jesus, God and humanity have become one so that he can restore the rest of humanity to its lost calling.*

* Quoting Tim Macke and Jon Collins, "The New Humanity:" The Bible Project video:

<https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/new-humanity/> Transcript:

<https://d1bsmz3sdihplr.cloudfront.net/media/Script%20References/The-New-Humanity-Script-References.pdf>

That's why Jesus prayed in John's gospel:

I pray that they will all be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us . . .
(John 17:21)

And then by his dying and rising again, Jesus opened the way back for us to experience reunion with God and share redeemed community with another. Thus he served as our Redeemer: the Second Person of the blessed Trinity who redeems and restores us from our fallen creation as represented in the Book of Genesis.

Now in our gospel reading appointed for today we hear how this saving redemption of Jesus also promises to protect and defend us. As Jesus takes his leave of the disciples at the end of Matthew's gospel, and prepares to ascend into the Godhead from where he came, the scripture says that "when they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted." Then the gospel ends with Jesus making this declaration:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt. 28:18b-20)

Now how do we here today experience this reality of Jesus 'being with us always, to the end of the age?'

Here I leave us with a parable of our divine intimacy with the Trinity as 'beloved community.' It's a parable that is told nowadays in different ways and with different terms. But on Trinity Sunday I offer it to you in the following terms.

Imagine a cohort of devout Christians, like those in the last book of the Christian Bible, the Book of Revelation, who have come through some sort of "great tribulation" (Rev. 7:14; Matt. 24:21, 29). They have all died as believers in Christ, and are now approaching the divine realm where souls are being welcomed into the new creation. Each one is joyfully listening as they hear their names being called, one by one, to enter into the blessed realm of light and bliss. But as the roll call ends some members of the group are left there, still waiting to hear their names called. In great distress they begin to lament and cry out to the throne of God, begging to know why their names have not been called. And that's when Jesus appears and says to them with the most tender apology:

'I'm so sorry for your distress. But you need to know that this sometimes happens. In fact, more often than you would think, it happens that souls arrive here expecting to join the new creation and experience eternal bliss. But when their names are called they don't recognize them because they are the names that one is called by someone who loves them unconditionally as a loving parent, or as a loving sibling, or as a loving spouse, or as a loving friend.'

'That's right: As your Father-Mother, Brother-Sister, or Spouse-Friend, I represent you as a Fourth member of the Holy Trinity, and I have been calling you all your life to be one with us as the I am one with the Father. But like too many others you have been more focused on God as a divine Judge, or God as a divine Critic, and even God as a divine Punisher and Executioner. However, that is a 'deep fake' counterfeit of the Godhead, who keeps masquerading as God or as an Angel of Light. That pretender has no reality in the new creation, and souls who still carry that kind of allegiance have a hard time hearing their true names called when they arrive here.'

'So here's our gracious policy for worthy souls like yourselves. We send you back into the world with as many opportunities as you need to re-do or make-over the key ways that you have doubted our divine mercy, compassion, and infinite love here. Take your time; by divine grace you will be given all the time and opportunities you need to let go of doubt and begin at last to recognize me as your Father-Mother, Brother-Sister, or Spouse-Friend. Thus I will be your Comforter and Advocate when you return here next time. You have my promise.'

So ends our parable. The parable ends with our humanity being honored *as if* all humanity were a fourth member of the Holy Trinity. That's right: Jesus as the second Person of the three-person God brings our humanity into Godhead and grounds us in eternal life so that as He is One with Godhead, so we are One with Him. And so we end with the invocation with which we began: "In the name of God: Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, *and Friend.*" Amen.

APPENDIX

Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation
From the Center for Action and Contemplation

The Fourth Person of the Trinity

Wednesday, September 21, 2016

<https://cac.org/daily-meditations/fourth-person-trinity-2016-09-21/>

© The Cathedral of St. Philip. All rights reserved.