

Holy Trinity B (5/27/2018)

Isaiah 6:1-8

Psalm 29

Romans 8:12-17

John 3:1-17

The Trinity doesn't mean anything until it means something to you. The symbol of the Trinity does not delineate the identity of God apart from God's relationship to the world, but expresses the human experience of being birthed, befriended, and upheld by God.

When we approach the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, we are apt to stray in two opposing directions. One tendency is to discount the symbol of the Trinity on the grounds that any effort to define God, especially in terms of an idea as developed as the Trinity, is foolish. God is so unfathomable, the thinking goes, that we might as well not try. Of course, there is wisdom in theological humility. We should never forget that all our human language about God is, in fact, human language. But, the language of Trinity, to quote Saint Augustine, “was coined not in order to give a complete explanation [of God], but in order that we might not be obliged to remain silent.”¹ In other words, **we have to say something. Otherwise, we risk becoming functional atheists, content to leave God in the realm of the ineffable and go about our lives unmoved by divine creativity and love.**

We err in the opposite direction, however, when we treat the doctrine of the Holy Trinity as if it were a literal description of God, or “a blueprint of the

¹ Cited in Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is*, 203.

inner workings of the godhead,” to borrow the words of Elizabeth Johnson.²

The symbol of the Trinity does not delineate the identity of God apart from God’s relationship to the world. If we seek to capture God’s fullness within the confines of a trinitarian formulation, like a picture in a frame, then we trade the true God for our concept of God.

The question remains: **How can we speak of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit with both humility and authenticity?** Throughout the ages, trinitarian theology has relied on analogy. Since reason alone cannot support the notion that One is actually Three and Three are One, we’ve always sought after approximations. Let me share one of my favorite trinitarian images with you: God the Father is the sun, enthroned in the sky far beyond our scope of life; we can’t even look directly at it on account of its brightness. God the Son is a sunbeam, streaming through the atmosphere to Earth. And, God the Holy Spirit is the point of light that actually reaches the Earth to warm your skin and nurture the growth of trees and flowers. In the end, the three are all one great light.³ Beautiful, isn’t it?

What is most compelling about this metaphor is that it describes God according to our lived experience. What matters most about the sun is not that it’s a giant sphere of hot plasma ninety-three million miles away, but that it’s the primary source of energy for life on Earth. **What matters most about God**

² Ibid. 204.

³ Ibid. 127

is not that God dwells beyond our ability to grasp, but that God is alive and active in the realm of our existence, that God draws near to us.

In other words, **the Trinity doesn't mean anything until it means something to you.** So, how do you make sense of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? For a parent who is on the verge of meeting a new child, the imagery in our Gospel from John is especially powerful: "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the reign of God without being born from above." Jesus' famous phrase is the subject of much debate. What does it mean to be "born from above," or "born again"? From a certain theological perspective, this pronouncement serves as a warning to anyone who has not taken proper action in response to the gospel. *Acknowledge Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior and be saved; be born again or suffer the consequences.* It's up to you. The irony of this interpretation, however, is that it contravenes the imagery of childbirth. After all, the child has no agency of his own; he cannot give birth to himself. He can only rely on his mother's fortitude and loving care. **To be "born" from above, to be "born" again, means to become an "infant" again – to be vulnerable, to entrust yourself to the one who births you and who loves you to death.**

This is God intimately involved in human life, indeed, the source and sustainer of life. Dear church, **this is the purpose of trinitarian theology, to name the one who births us and calls us beloved, who also befriends us and shares our suffering, and who breathes new life into us through faith.** We can never speculate our way to a perfect understanding of God, and

we don't have to. Instead, let's "speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen," that we have come to cherish the Three-in-One because of the ways the One-in-Three has cherished us.