

First Sunday after Pentecost:
Trinity Sunday
4 June 2023
Year A
Rev. Scott Deasy

Lord God, come to us in all your delightful difference and thick complexity. Come to us as Lover, Beloved, and the Loving. Come to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Save us from our futile attempts to try to tame your immensity, to worship you as less than you are. Enable us to grow up toward you rather than to try to shrink you down to our limits. Come to us, we pray, so that we might come to you as you are. Amen.

Willimon, William H.

Today's Gospel reading are the final words in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus is giving his disciples their final instructions and promises. This reading also represents the conclusion of Matthew's Gospel narrative and, therefore, the final instructions and promises for us, its readers.

The scene is a mountain, a site associated with the divine presence. This peak is in the middle of Galilee. Galilee, an area hostile to the Jews. When the eleven saw Jesus, we are told they worshiped him but some doubted.

Jesus gives them three charges:

1. "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations,"
2. Baptize "them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,"
3. Teach them to "obey everything that I have commanded you."

This is the first time Jesus instructs his disciples to go out and teach.

Jesus reminds them that "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to [him]." He concludes by promising the disciples that "I will always be with you..."

This 5-verse reading can inspire a host of homilies. Today, as it is Trinity Sunday, I am focusing on the second charge: To baptize "them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

But what exactly does this mean? What is the nature of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? What is their relationship to each other and what does that mean to us?

When the Jewish author of the book of Matthew wrote these lines, it is very unlikely he had a well-developed concept of the Trinity. Most likely he reported what was transmitted to him without totally understanding its meaning. As a Jew, he believed that there was only one God, not three. How the three Trinitarian elements interrelated was probably unclear.

In the following centuries Christian theologians argued over the concept of the Trinity and specifically Jesus' status within it. People outside of the church accused Christians of worshipping three gods. They wanted to know who Jesus, this individual Christians called "the Christ," was. Man, or another God? Unfortunately, there is very little written in what we know today as the Gospels about the concept of the Trinity or a Triune God. This question of the nature of Jesus and, therefore, the very nature of God percolated throughout the Christian world. Was Jesus a coequal partner with the Father, the God of creation? Was Jesus of the "same substance," "of one Being" in today's parlance, with the Father? Was he of a "different substance," a being created separately from God?

In the early 4th century, Constantine declared Christianity to be the Roman state religion. He inherited this lingering dispute that was becoming more problematic with the so-called Arian Controversy. Arius from Alexandria had made the following statement concerning the relationship between the Father and Jesus:

"If the Father begat the Son, he that was begotten had a beginning of existence: hence it is that there was when the Son was not. It follows then of necessity that he had his existence from the non-existence."

Said another way, if Jesus was created by the Father, then he did not exist from the beginning and was less than the Father.

Carrying this logic forward, this meant in Arius' view, God the Father was an utterly unique, self-contained, and self-sufficient entity.

In opposition to Arius and his ideas was Athanasius. Athanasius was a bit younger than Arius and also from Alexandria. He argued that Jesus had been "begotten" by the Father from his own being and therefore had always been a co-equal.

In the early 300s there were two competing concepts of the nature of Jesus. One held that Jesus was created by God and was therefore different from God. The other that Jesus was brought into this world from God's own substance and therefore was of God. As you sit here listening to this, I suspect that I am giving you a bit of a headache? Am I just splitting hairs?

We, as Jesus' disciples are asked to go and make disciples of all nations, right? Fundamental to spreading the Gospel is having a coherent idea of the God we worship and his Son. As Jesus said to "... know me ... [is to] know my Father as well, (John 14:7)" making these arguments about the nature of Jesus of great importance.

Constantine demanded orthodoxy, uniformity for his state religion and convened the First Council at Nicaea in 325CE. At the Council, the Athanasian understanding of the role of Jesus was overwhelmingly affirmed with only 2 of the 568 delegates refusing to sign off on the final document. I'll let you guess who one of the two was. Yes! Arius. Even so, the Arian controversy remained active for the next 100 years or so. Multiple church councils were held addressing in one form or another this divisive issue. Changes in the political climate forced Athanasius to be exiled five times because of his beliefs and advocacy. After all, some rulers prefer not to have to deal with a God so engaged in this world. In the Western Church (Rome) Jerome and Augustine of Hippo continued the fight against Arianism after Athanasius' time.

Since the 4th Century, the shadow of Arianism has periodically appeared. Examples include the Enlightenment with the popularization of the image of God as the "clockmaker." Another example is the "God is Dead" arguments of the 1960s. In the last century, writers such as Carl Barth pushed back at renewed Arianism.

Every time we recite the Nicene Creed, we make a faith statement concerning the Trinity. The same is true when we recite our Baptismal Covenant, be it at Baptism, Confirmation, or most recently, Pentecost. As Episcopalians, we believe that the "Trinity is one God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit," as stated on in our Catechism on page 852 of the Book of Common Prayer.

Also, within the Book of Common Prayer on page 865 is the Athanasian Creed which reads in part:

"So there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons; one Holy Ghost, not three Holy Ghosts. And in this, Trinity is none afore or after other; none is greater or less than another. But the whole three persons are co-eternal together and co-equal."

Now, I have been aware of the general outline of this history for years and have realized the foundational importance of the concept of the Trinity we profess through the Nicene Creed. I also realize that the whole concept is a mystery, a reality beyond my ability to fully comprehend. The writings of a theologian named Arthur McGill have more recently allowed me to again assess my understanding of the Arian controversy and how it informs our understanding of the

nature of God. To review, the Arian view is that of a God that is a singular, isolated, and completely beyond our reality. The view we inherited from Athanasian is of a God that is plural, involved, and existing or operating within our reality, with us here, now, and always.

Arius argued that Jesus was of a “different substance” from God the Father. In Arius’ mind, if Jesus were to be a coeternal or a coequal partner, that implied a yearning or a vulnerability in the Father. Taking this a few steps further, this suggested that God could change; God could be affected by another. For Arius, this was unimaginable. How could God be anything but an unchangeable reality? How could God be moved by his creation?

For Athanasius, the incarnation of God in Christ revealed an eternal God that is relational, a mutually self-giving, a mutually participating reality. McGill says that within God is a “unity of love, a unity in which the identity of each party is not swallowed up and annihilated but established.” This is a God that celebrates and embraces us individually in a “unity of love.” This is a God that not only knows each of the hairs on our head but celebrates each one of them.

As Jesus said in today’s Gospel, Jesus has been given “all authority in heaven and on earth.” God does not hold back anything as God is not self-possessive or self-preserving. God’s power, and therefore Jesus’, is self-giving, even to the point of exhaustion and sacrifice. Self-giving as in the crucifixion. Self-giving as in teaching and healing us, at times with great frustration and exhaustion on Jesus’ part. This concept of self-giving is the root of God’s exercise of power. We, God’s creation, and his Son are connected to a sharing God. Ours is a relationship of mutuality, of love, of community.

As Jesus said: “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.” AMEN