

The Experience of God  
and the Inclusivity of the Church

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Trinity Sunday

I wasn't at the church convention myself, of course, but I read about it. I bet many of you have too. Talk about controversy! Local church meetings breaking down into arguments and name-calling and outrage. Regional church meetings leading not to resolution but to migraine headaches and ulcers all around. Then this huge church meeting--all the bigwigs there, all the church politicians--and this meeting proved to be more rancorous yet.

Did you hear? One delegate went into something like a food court near the convention center, and the guy behind the counter demanded to know his position on the issues before he would even give him his lunch. Marches, protests, demonstrations. They say there were even riot police on standby. Yeah, riot police. That's what I read: the Roman Emperor himself, Constantine the Great, put imperial Roman troops on standby against riots at the Council of Nicea in the year 325 AD.

Then as now, sexuality is controversial stuff. Folks get riled, really quick. So today, as we celebrate the doctrine of the Trinity and remember the Council of Nicea, where the doctrine Trinity was first defined, we need to rejoice. We need to rejoice that we can look at our current controversies about homosexuality and tell ourselves "been there, done that"--and survived. God is with God's people, and we will get through this. All of us. Together. We might even learn something new in the process, as the Council of Nicea did.

So let me explain a few things about the Council of Nicaea. In the early centuries of Christianity, some people believed that holiness demanded an absolute renunciation of all sexual activity. They thought that way because they believed

that the body itself is innately corrupt. The reason why they thought that is a terrific story all on its own, but there's not time this morning to do it justice. The bottom line is this: in the century or so before Nicaea, ordination to any office in the church, leadership of any sort even at the local level, officially required complete abstinence from all sexual activity--even for married people. That demand remained in place until the Protestant reformation more than a thousand years later, even though enforcement was sometimes pretty slack.

But in these very early centuries, plenty of people were outraged. Absolutely outraged. Their counter-claims focused not upon sex directly but rather upon how that kind of attitude raises big questions about Jesus. If the body itself is morally corrupt, why would God have become human in the first place??? "What do we make of Jesus?" became the flash-point issue for a very complicated array of other questions, including--in a central way--the relationship between our minds or our souls and our mortal, sexual bodies. Insisting that Jesus that is both human and divine makes quite a claim about the potential holiness of any body--yours, mine, the person sitting next to you, the person dying of cancer in the hospital this morning. We don't have to disembody ourselves to be holy--which was certainly the claim of one contingent at the Council of Nicaea.

The church survived the controversies about holiness and embodiment in part by defining the doctrine of the Trinity. In many ways, the Nicene Creed is a something-for-everyone political compromise rather than an intellectually adequate summary of Christian faith. As somebody pointed out to me once, the ministry and teachings of Jesus disappear into a comma. But there are times when messy practical compromises are exactly what's called for. And so, since this is Trinity Sunday, let me sketch one very pragmatic, very concrete understanding of what we mean by "Trinity." I think that might help us see what kind of church we ought to be in such hard times as these, amidst our own controversies about sexuality and salvation.

One approach to the doctrine of the Trinity goes like this: ordinary human life includes three very different sorts of experiences of God. Or at least, within

Christian tradition we sort all the innumerable experiences of God into three general categories. One way or another, spiritual adulthood involves finding at least pieces of all three experiences. Until you catch at least a glimpse of all three, you have not yet met the God we gather to worship and to continue getting to know.

We meet the "first person" of the Trinity in small inexplicable moments that the poet Wordsworth calls "spots of time." Once in a while, just for a moment, we look up and the world is suddenly beautiful. Coherent. For a moment this world is a meaningful place of extravagant variety and unbearable grandeur. For a moment, our lives make sense. For a moment, the meaning of our lives is good and clear even though we can't begin to explain it.

Such moments can happen anywhere. It happened to a friend of mine hiking in the mountains above Mexico City, but it happened to someone else I know while he was riding the Chicago subway. If you can encounter the glory of God and the meaning of your own life while riding the Chicago subway in July, then God is apt to show up anywhere at all. Which God does.

But if we forget that there is more to God than grandeur, then pretty soon all that's left is the harsh, judgmental god of nightmare, the mean old man in the sky who sends sinners to hell for messing up his perfectly orderly world. This is the false god of the false church that excludes and condemns and divides us into an in-group and out-group. These glimpses of glory deteriorate into condemnation and self-righteousness because we become afraid. In the face of God's glory, we become afraid to face our own failures, and we become afraid to face the reality that *all* of us belong to God, even those folks who seem to us quite a bit less than glorious. Living as we do in a world shaped by hatred and fear and violence, we turn away, stunned and terrified, from our glimpses of a God who takes such delight in all of us.

But spots of time are not the only experience of God. There is a second experience or a second large general category. We meet the "second person" of the Trinity in moments when we realize we have been rescued. We have

survived but not by our own skill and not by our own wisdom. The really interesting congregations in God's church are just full of folks who have been beat up something awful, one way or another, in public or in extremely private ways, but who have survived and in surviving have found exactly what Jesus promised: peace not as the world knows peace, but the peace that surpasses all human understanding. The crucifixion became God's attempt to convince us that God really does understand just how bad life can get and how much pain we have to live with sometimes--and then God proves, on Easter morning, that no matter what happens to us in this life, we will survive with our humanity intact. God loves us because of who God is and what God wants, not because we have earned it. We don't have to earn it. We don't have anything to prove, not to God and not to anyone else either. And that is a spectacularly dangerous insight. Think that thought once a day for a month, and your life will never be the same. Try it tomorrow: "I have nothing to prove . . ."

Just don't lose sight of the Trinity while you think that thought. Because if we forget that there is more to God than mercy and compassion, then pretty soon all that's left is the Anything Goes god. If God loves all of us no matter what, then maybe it doesn't matter whether we are honest. Whether we are just. Whether we are courageous. Whether we try to live as Jesus lived. This is the false god of the false church that baptizes with syrup and sentimentality and self-approval, the false church that cannot guide any of us to anything better than egotism and self-absorption.

And there is a third experience of God, one we celebrated last week at Pentecost and one we hear described in today's readings as well. These days it's usually called the "Holy Spirit," but when I was a kid we said the "Holy Ghost." Now as any kid knows, ghosts are scary stuff. And so "Holy Ghost" still makes sense to me as a title, because this experience of God is distinctly disconcerting. To say the least. The "third person" of the Trinity is a sneaky, sleazy, crazy character, that dangerous "still small voice" who makes absolutely outrageous little suggestions. Sometimes big suggestions. Maybe even demands: "do this or I will

haunt you until you do!" This is the God whose hands we are, whose people we are, whose work we are called to do. This is the God who inspires soup kitchens and Habitat for Humanity and collections to pay for disaster relief. This is the God we turn to for guidance as we cope with all the gritty problems of our own lives. Get Christians together and talking about *this* experience of God, and you will come away just as terrified as you felt as kid away at camp, curled up in your tent listening the bigger kids tell ghost stories in the dark.

How does God gets away with all this? Today's reading tells us. Warns us, in fact, like those little warnings on cigarette packages. God is seductive, that's what. God is this incredible delight at the heart of things. This seductive delight. Do what this crazy God suggests, and you will find a seductive delight goes all the way down to the core of reality, because the glory of God, the transcendent grandeur of creation, is God's own delight in what God has made. And it's the Holy Ghost who gives us a share in it. That mix of seductive power and practical management explains the deep and very ancient tradition of talking about the Holy Spirit as a woman.

Just keep the Trinity in mind, that's all. If we forget that there is more to God than this still small voice deep in our souls, then pretty soon we will lose track of the difference between God and our own unconscious drives and egotistical needs. We keep that distinction alive by staying together, by listening to one another. Poets and mystics, visionaries and dreamers have got to have a community just as much as communities have to have dreams and visions to call their own. Otherwise, you are left with the false god of the false church you invent for yourself in order to worship yourself. This is the origin of violent fundamentalism and those lunatic fringe groups who commit suicide together or else plan attacks on everyone else.

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What does it take to be the church of such a triune God? We have to accept that a true Christian faith depends upon paradox. God will always be more than we can imagine or describe, and "Trinity" is our name for the mystery at the heart

of our faith. Coping with this mystery, learning to live with this paradox, has powerful practical implications for our life together as the church. Most of these implications I am sure you can see for yourselves. But in particular, I want to suggest, the mystery of God has serious implications for how Christians should cope with the mystery of sexual orientation. I want to honor your inviting me here this morning by explaining some of how I see that. I know what a tough issue sexuality is for this congregation, and I hope what I say doesn't cause pain.

It seems to me that Christians cannot say to the homosexual community--or to anyone else, for that matter-- that "your experience of God doesn't count." We cannot say "you may not pray with us" and we cannot say "you may not work with us, serve with us, offer your gifts to God's service on the table here." To say such things is to put ourselves in the place of God.

But the churches have been trapped into saying that. And we have been trapped in this way because we do not distinguish properly between homosexuality, which is a biological variation of some kind, and promiscuity, which is morally wrong. And this has happened, in turn, because we have given in to the popular culture that says that homosexuals are not capable of sexual fidelity. (In fact, a lot of popular culture says that *none* of us is capable of sexual fidelity, but that's another matter.) In very powerful ways and for a very long time, the popular culture has said that homosexuals are not capable of honesty. That they are not capable of commitment and compassion. And because popular culture insists that homosexuals are not capable of sexual fidelity, their long-term sexually-faithful commitments remain culturally invisible.

I have a good friend who is both a Yale Ph.D. in English and a deeply religious person--although she'd never admit it. She is brilliant. She is also kind, and generous, and compassionate. She and her partner Mary Ann just celebrated their 37th anniversary of faithful life together. She left the Methodist church forty years ago, convinced that God does not love her, that God cannot love her. Nonetheless, from time to time, during the week when no one is here, she will stop into a church and sit alone for a while, in the dark, by herself, not really

understanding why she comes. She will never fight to belong where she is hated, but surely the church is diminished by the loss of her gifts and by the grief we have imposed upon a fine, long, honorable life.

As we read in Acts just a few weeks ago, what God has created as part of God's extravagant inexplicable variety we must not spurn, lest we reduce God to the image of our own fears and insecurities. I admit that homosexuality perplexes me. I admit that I don't understand it. But no where is it written that any of us get to understand the complexity of God's creation. Look at those pictures from the Hubble Telescope! God's extravagance is inexplicable. All that I do understand is how many wonderful people simply insist that this is how God made them, just as God made me left handed. Or good with words. Some gifts are very scary, there is no question about that at all.

We must always remember that we are called to love this perplexing God with all our hearts and our neighbors as ourselves. Let Trinity Sunday remind us that since the year 325 we have known that this command will at times baffle and confuse and divide us. The commandment to love one another will generate angry meetings unless we can remember that God's love is more than any of us will understand, and so our experiences of God are necessarily complicated. That's part of why we get together to pray.

Above all, that's why everyone has to be welcome to pray among us. The faith we come here to share and to celebrate is not an idea nor a belief. Faith is a set of practices, a way of life, a way of living and working and praying side by side, year after year, learning from one another, struggling to live together in peace and in generosity. We pray together because there is an extraordinary power set loose when we share our many, mysterious, perplexing experiences of this extraordinary God. God is beyond our understanding. The Trinitarian character of God is beyond our understanding. But accepting and welcoming each other is something we can do. And it is something we must do, because God calls us to love each other--to love God's Trinitarian image etched deep in the soul of every human being.