

Trinity Sunday, Year C

22 May 2016

The Rev. Dr. Brian C. Wyatt, Pastor

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

John 16:12-15

This morning is Trinity Sunday in the church calendar, far and away the least favorite of all the church holidays. No preacher wants to spend 15-20 minutes expounding on a doctrine she or he studied in seminary and probably still can't understand, much less explain. And odds are even better no congregation wants to hear that either. But this Sunday celebrates a pretty basic

foundation of our faith that came in response to three centuries of heresies we've been studying.

We've been reciting together this morning some words composed about 1700 years ago in modern day Istanbul. Words whose existence is due in no small part to the heretics we've been looking at this Easter season. Words that, if we stop to really look at them, may sound strange or

archaic to our modern, scientific ears. Words that, if we're honest, we may or may not wholly believe in, or maybe not understand well enough to know if we believe in them or not.

Words that we call the Nicene Creed. In 325 CE, the first of four large councils of bishops was held in Turkey to address the heresies we've been learning about. Or to put a more positive spin on it, "how do we understand and experience God?"

The short answer to that is we talk about the Trinity, one God, known in three distinct

ways. The word 'trinity' does not appear anywhere in scripture. Though we find a few references to the persons of the Trinity, nowhere do any of the scripture writers mention the Trinity, or one God in three persons, or any of that language. That took over 300 years to settle.

Yet Christians have long confessed that there is one God, but that God is revealed in more than one way. Within the Christian tradition, we talk specifically about three ways we experience God: as something beyond us,

as something among us, and as something within us. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Faith, Hope, and Love. The One who was, and who is, and who is to come. Or from Hildegard of Bingen in the 12th century: Brightness, Flashing Forth, and Fire. Or St. Patrick who described the Trinity as Love, Beloved, and the love between.

Ultimately, all language is inadequate, and falls short of capturing the totality of our experience of God, but I do believe that even

deficient metaphors and creeds can direct us toward a deeper understanding and experience of God.

Will Willimon, Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, tells this story from back when he was in seminary.ⁱ

In a church history course in my last year at Yale Divinity School, the professor invited an Orthodox priest to lecture. He gave a rather dry talk on the development of the Nicene Creed. At the end of the lecture an earnest student asked, "Father Theodore, what can one do when one finds it impossible to affirm certain

tenets of the creed?"

The priest looked confused. "Well, you just say it. It's not that hard to master. With a little effort, most can quickly learn it by heart."

"No, you don't understand," continued the student, "What am I to do when I have difficulty affirming parts of the creed—like the Virgin Birth?" The priest continued to look confused. "You just say it. Particularly when you have difficulty believing it, you just keep saying it. It will come to you eventually."

Exasperated, the

student, a product of the same church that produced me (Methodist), and a representative of the 60's, plead, "How can I with integrity affirm a creed I do not believe?"

"It's not your creed young man!" said the priest. "It's the Church's creed. Keep saying it for heaven's sake! Eventually, it may come to you. For some, it takes longer than for others. How old are you? Twenty-three? Don't be so hard on yourself. There are lots of things one doesn't know at twenty-three. Eventually it may

come to you. Even if it doesn't, don't worry. It's not your creed."

It's the Church's creed. That is why we say, "We believe..." and not "I believe..." When I wrote my own statement of faith to submit to Holston Presbytery when they were voting me in, I used different words, different language, to express my core beliefs about the Christian faith today. My guess is we would all choose different language today to articulate our own personal faith.

But these words, forged through 300 years of prayer and

study and fighting and controversy are not meant to be my personal statement of faith.

You and I, when we recite the Creed this morning, are choosing to place ourselves in continuity with a great tradition of thinking Christians who are always struggling to find the words to convey the great mysteries of God to humankind. Our language, our words, will always fail to capture the majesty and mystery of the God we experience in creation, in Christ, in the spirit that moves among us.

Yet still, in unity with the collective wisdom of the saints before us and around us, I invite us now to rise, and join together, in proclaiming the faith of the Church that we

claim, and that has claimed us, as we say what we believe.
Amen.

ⁱ *The Christian Century*, February 7-14, 1996, p.137.