

God is Bigger than you Think! Readings for Trinity Sunday: Is. 6:1-8; Rom. 8:12-17; John 3:1-17
By the Rev. Karen Faye Siegfriedt; St. Barnabas Episcopal Church, Arroyo Grande CA 5/30/21

Today is Trinity Sunday. It is the only Feast day in our liturgical calendar when we celebrate a Christian doctrine; in particular, the doctrine of God. If you want to understand God more fully, if you want to experience God more fully, if you want to be transformed into the likeness of Christ, then the Trinity is for you! The Trinity is simply an expanded understanding of God that helps us become more aware of the God in whom we live and move and have our being. One God, three persons. While the traditional names of the three persons of the Trinity are Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Trinity is NOT made up of two men and a bird. Let's take a closer look at this expanded understanding of God.

Before writing this sermon, I googled the word *God*. There were over 2.5 billion entries. Eleven years ago, I did this same exercise and only came up with 0.5 billion results. Does this mean that God has expanded over the last decade? I think not! In fact, for many people, their understanding of God has diminished, depriving them of a robust spiritual life. No wonder there are so many agnostics and non-believers today.

There are small ways and stupid ways to think about God and the internet is full of them. For instance, some people think of God as a kind of *Santa Claus*; a man up in the sky with a long white beard, waiting to hear and respond to our wish list but only if we are nice boys and girls. This is a child-like notion of God that often disappoints when we don't get what we want. I think Michelangelo solidified this image when he painted the Sistine Chapel some 500 years ago. In that mural, a man with a beard (who is supposedly God) reaches out to Adam with his finger, artistically portraying the creation of the world. And while God is the source of creation, God is not a man or a human being. In fact, to hold such a graven image of God is idolatry and is an affront to the second commandment.

Another image of God, often highlighted by angry preachers and bible thumpers, is God as a *Marquis de Sade*. This is a dominant deity inflicting pain and suffering on human beings. This is a God who despises sin and sinners with such a passion that he will even arrange for their extermination.

The Master of Ceremonies god is a favorite among the more sentimental types. If you are planning a wedding, a bar mitzvah, or a baptism, but haven't stepped into a church or a synagogue in years, then this is the god for you. This is the god who is often exploited by people wanting a traditional ceremony in order to make themselves or others feel better. This god of ceremonies can provide an illusion for those who have no real religious convictions or spiritual motivation. Unfortunately, this part-time god goes away once the ritual is over.

As for me, I confess that I have had in the past, a *Susie Sunshine* notion of God. This is a kind of Doris Day/Mr. Rogers happy-go-lucky god who sends sunbeams down to warm your heart or hovers over you on a rainy day with an umbrella. This god is all about love but not real love. This god nourishes but does not discipline, coddles but does not do the difficult work of purifying. The Susie Sunshine God is a bland god suitable for middle class palates; one that is so comfortable that it has little influence in sustaining folks through the difficult challenges in life. Because of their delusion, these sunshine followers are often devastated when great pain and loss strike. You can often hear their lament when a close relative or friend dies, as they ask: "Where is God and why didn't he save my loved one?"

There are many small and misguided ways to think about God which cloud our relationships. So let us focus instead on expanded notions of God that can help us experience life in its fullness, the abundant life that has been promised to us. Let us take a closer look at the Holy Trinity. First of all, the early Christian disciples did not sit around a table one day thinking it would be a good idea to cook up a new doctrine of God. They had always had a deep abiding relationship with the God whom Christians refer to as God the Father, Muslims refer to as Allah, and Jews refer to as YHWH, Adonai, or Elohim. This God is the creator of heaven and earth, whom Isaiah experienced in the temple, proclaiming: "Holy, holy, holy, is Adonai, the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory." (Is. 6:3)

For me, this image of the whole earth being full of God's glory is one of the most important understandings I have of God the creator. It guides the way I interact with creation and my passion to

protect it from harm. Because God's glory fills the earth, this means that our planet, the air, the waters, the soil, the heavens above, and all the creatures who inhabit our earth are sacred. Perhaps this sacredness is what people connect with in nature. In effect, they are getting in touch with God the Father, the first person of the Trinity.

God the Son is the second person of the Trinity, the one whose likeness we are called to become. After meeting Jesus, hearing the words he spoke and witnessing the healing acts he performed, the early disciples started to experience God through him in a very powerful way. They began to understand Jesus as the anointed one, the path of love, the mouthpiece of God, or in biblical language, the 'Word of God.' Overtime, the early Church accepted this witness and gave voice to the dual nature of Jesus; both his humanity and divinity which is summed up in the words of the Nicene Creed. John's gospel speaks in detail of the importance of God's Word enfleshed in the person of Jesus and sums it up in John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." This is the One whose path of love Christians have promised to follow.

After Jesus ascended and was no longer with them physically, the disciples began to experience a powerful presence of God through the Spirit. We just read about their experience at Pentecost. They called this Spirit "Holy" because it not only moved them from a place of fear to a place of courage, but it also filled them with wisdom and truth to preach the good news in Christ. It was from these expanded experiences of God that the doctrine of the Trinity emerged: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Unfortunately, the Holy Spirit, has been the 'Cinderella' of the Trinity; the step sister who has been told to stay home while Jesus gets to go to the ball. If you take a closer look at the Nicene Creed, you will notice that the theology of the Holy Spirit has not been fully developed. Why? Perhaps it is because of the risk in allowing the Holy Spirit to take a prominent place in our spiritual lives, directing us to change in radical ways. How do we discern the workings of this Spirit from other spirits that are enticing us? We recognize the Holy Spirit by its fruit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God." (Rom. 8)

So what is the relevance of the Trinity today? How can this doctrine inspire us to become a shining light in this sometimes darkened world? First of all, we need to embody the Trinity as a way of life, not just some philosophical idea. The Holy Trinity calls us to be a holy people. When we acknowledge the divine image embedded in every creature and affirm God's glory filling the entire earth, then we will think twice about going to war, polluting our environment, and supporting those systems of power that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God. Remember, you will never look into the eyes of someone whom God does not love.

Next, when we embrace the Trinity as a way of life and not just some philosophical idea, we will follow Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life. Instead of supporting millionaires to become billionaires through tax breaks and economic incentives, we will support an economy that provides a living wage for all of God's people. Instead of spending trillions of dollars on weapons of mass destruction, we will make changes to our national budget to provide health care for all of God's people. Jesus never said: "Feed the hungry only if they have papers. Help the poor only if it's convenient. Love your neighbor only if they look like you." No, he said: "Whatever you do to one of the least of these, you do unto me." (Mt. 25:40)

History has shown us over time that most people will compromise the path of love or avoid the gospel issues of justice, power, money, and inclusion when it requires significant personal sacrifice. Yet the Holy Trinity yearns for us to chart a new trajectory in history. And so holy people of St. Barnabas and beyond, if you find yourself troubled by the turmoil and divisiveness in our country, if your heart is broken by the sorrows of families throughout the world, if you are concerned about the future of planet earth, then it is time to take concrete action. And like the first disciples who prayed together, waiting for the power of the Holy Spirit to give them the impetus and courage to move forward, we too need to plead for the Holy Spirit to fall on each one of us, in the Church, in our government, and in our world.

“Heavenly Father, who has filled the world with beauty: Open our eyes to behold your gracious hand in all your works; that, rejoicing in your whole creation, we may learn to serve you with gladness; for the sake of him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.” (BCP 814)