

Trinity Sunday
The Rev. Dn. Nancy Casey Fulton
May 27, 2018

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Or, as we sometimes say, *In the name of the Creator, the Teacher, and the Comforter*

When Wayne asked several weeks ago whether I would preach today, I immediately agreed, knowing it was Trinity Sunday. Previous colleagues have tricked me—Wayne tricked Diane last year—quietly suggesting a certain preaching date in late May or early June, not mentioning that it's Trinity Sunday. This time I walked into this day with my eyes open, not sure I had something new to say, but willing nevertheless. You may have read Wayne's comments in his on-line parish update for this week: "Ah, the Holy Trinity, vexation of every preacher I know (thank you, O Deacon, for taking this on!). So here we are, hoping to hear something new about this celebration of a theological construct,

I believe that the concept of the Trinity arose from the early church's struggle to understand what they saw as three separate entities:

- The Creator, whom they called Father, Jehovah, Yahweh
- Jesus, the anointed Son of God; the Redeemer of the earth
- The Holy Spirit, sent by the Father to strengthen the followers of Jesus once he ascended into Heaven

As you can imagine, everyone had a different idea about these three persons in one God, and so the history of the Church has been peppered with arguments and "heresies." Two examples:

- Arianism: this heresy denies the divinity of Christ because the Son was created by the Father at some point, and so was neither co-

eternal with the Father, nor distinct from the Father, and was therefore subordinate to the him. Got that?

- Modalism: the persons of the Trinity represent only three modes or aspects of the divine revelation, not distinct and co-existing persons in the divine nature.

And on and on.

At the Council of Nicea, which met for a month in the year of the Lord 325, the Church Fathers tried to hammer out a creed that would satisfy the conflicting voices in the Church, as well as in the Empire, whose protection they desired in a chaotic world. They were partially successful in that the Nicene Creed has bound together most Christians for centuries. A major exception is the divide between the Western and Eastern churches over the “filioque” clause in the Nicene Creed—that the Spirit “proceeds from the Father and the Son”—not just from the Father.

So, if there are three persons in God, who do you pray to? This too has generated hot conversation. Christians of more conservative bent are comfortable addressing their petitions to God the Father (or to “Father God”). But Roman Catholics, silent before the power of the Creator, have skirted this problem by throwing their petitions at the feet of the Virgin Mary, who would certainly intercede with her son on their behalf. Her son would then intercede with the Father, avoiding the need to stand trembling before the Creator,

I remember, as a Catholic child, sitting through one evening of a “novena”—nine days of prayer—to the Blessed Virgin Mary. In his *View of Society and Manners in France, Switzerland, and Germany*, the eighteenth-century physician and travel writer, Dr. John Moore, quoted a devout Catholic woman of Vienna:

“ . . . she could not comprehend how [addressing the Almighty could comfort her], for that God the Father was so great and awful, that her

eneration was mixed with such a degree of dread, as confounded all her ideas when she attempted to approach him; but the blessed Mary was so mild, so condescending, and compassionate a character, that she could address her with more confidence.”

I have struggled with the theology of the Trinity, and hence with the Nicene Creed, to the point of remaining silent when the congregation recites it together.

More than one priest has told me that it is all right to doubt, that the belief of those who speak the words would carry me along. In time, this didn't help: just hearing the patriarchal words, and the references to Jesus dying for our sins, troubled me. I began to feel a hypocrite for pretending to accept every part of the Creed. And so I was silent, but I worried: How could I, as a deacon in the Church, fail to join in the words that define our faith?

To sort out my thoughts about the Trinity, I wrote what I can only call a “midrash,” an interpretation of the Nicene Creed in language that I could speak with confidence. We haven't used it lately, so I will read it for you:

I believe in God, who breathed into existence
earth, sea, and sky; the creatures who inhabit them;
and men and women, made in the divine image.

I believe in Jesus the Christ,
who came into the world in human form
to show us the way to the fullness of life
which is our inheritance.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
who gives us wisdom and understanding for our journey.

I believe in the universal Church,
the heart and hands of the Creator in this world;
the saints, known and unknown, who have gone before us;
the forgiveness of sins;

the resurrection of these imperfect bodies;
and the life everlasting. Amen.

I was nervous the first time we used this interpretation of the Creed, but was immediately reassured when a woman of the congregation said “Now that’s a Creed I can sign on to!” We’ve used it quite often over the years, and I would guess that for many of us it seems “normal,” just another one of those more inclusive prayers that have found their way into our liturgy. Theologian Richard Rohr is one of those thinkers who has added to our understanding the Trinity.

- He names God, who is “Being” itself, the Creator
- Christ—the anointed one—who is a living manifestation of the Creator
- Holy Spirit, who is the energy within and between God and Christ, creating a sort of “divine dance”

Our brothers and sisters of previous centuries would be shocked by this idea, by our openness to new ways of seeing life in God. After all, in the nineteenth century people of faith argued over Darwin’s theory of evolution, which we accept today as a scientific fact that in no way clouds our belief in God or threatens our eternal souls. And today, often for the same reasons that Darwin shocked the Victorians, many Christians reject the notion of global warming in spite of clear evidence that it is taking place. Most of us understand that science does not threaten or diminish our faith, but instead enhances our wonder at creation, and at the being who brought it all into existence, and who, quite possibly, still has a hand in what unfolds.

Our faith, like the earth, is in constant flux, and so we pause on this day to reflect on the mystery of the Trinity; to reflect on our place in this vast and mysterious universe.

To reflect on the silence of the Being who made us; To reflect on the love of the Anointed One who came to earth to open our hearts and minds to the mystery that is life; and to reflect on the wisdom of the

Spirit, who joins us in our walk on this earth, pointing out the treasures along our way.