

St. John's Church
Trinity Sunday

June 3, 2007
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Some months ago the San Francisco Chronicle published a letter Fred Fenton had sent in, and at the end of his letter Fred referred to the memorable Bishop James Pike, who had referred to the Trinity as "excess baggage." So for months I've been thinking that I'd start my Trinity Sunday sermon by admitting that challenge — how do 21st century Christians deal with Trinitarian baggage? Why do we carry it around? Let's try to "unpack" this luggage and see what's of value for our spiritual lives.

Perhaps some of you have seen a bumper sticker: *If Jesus is the answer, what is the question?* When a sermon starts with a bumper sticker quote, it can only get better from there! I quoted that little phrase because today we celebrate a unique Sunday in the calendar — Trinity Sunday. All the other Sundays of the year are based on Biblical events, centering around some event in the life of Jesus Christ, usually found in the Gospel. But Trinity Sunday is different. Although we are familiar with the concept, we may feel far removed from the questions that led to the teaching about the Trinity. **If the Trinity is the answer, then just what was the question?** This elaborate and sometimes confusing theology we know as Trinitarian doctrine did not **start** as some kind of abstract divine geometry. Where did it come from?

Well, it didn't come from Biblical words. The word "Trinity" is not in the Bible. But in the New Testament we can see the beginnings of that pattern of thinking which led later Christians to reflect upon their experience of how God worked. The first Christians grew up as Jews, insistent upon the basic insight that God was one. Living among polytheistic cultures, Jews proclaimed God's unity above all else. Yet the first Christians experienced that God was revealed in a completely new fashion through the life and death and rising of Christ Jesus. Slowly and carefully, these people questioned and debated their way until they could speak of "God the Son," and understand that God was not divided, and yet manifested in human form. A later generation of Christian thinkers understood that the Holy Spirit (whose feast we celebrated last Sunday on Pentecost) also revealed the power of God's love.

On Trinity Sunday, it's good to acknowledge that there are at least three principal ways in which human beings can understand God. Christianity is a universal religion — not that everyone in the world has to see it our way, but that there's room for everyone! We know some people who are "spirit" persons, who cultivate inspiration — and some people who are more like "Christ in action," serving Jesus in the neighbor — and some who are the strong silent types, not talking religion, just living it. These three spiritual types don't always see eye to eye or understand one another's views, but today, on Trinity Sunday, we can say that all express a face (facet) of God. Some people we know have a tough time even talking about God. These people are left cold by talk about "what God is doing in my

life". Maybe you're one of them, or you know someone else to whom God seems silent. To all of you who wonder if you're even Christian, I say: "Rejoice! You are God the Creator's strong silent types."

When our Vestry meets for our monthly meetings, we join in prayer for our parish family. One of the prayers refers to the second person of the Trinity as the "Pain-Bearer." Many of us, and many of the people we know, are faced with undeserved suffering. And even if we have no immediate suffering to bear, all of us have been weighed down for years by the enormity of how our country is enmeshed in a civil war in Iraq.

Whatever our opinions may be about the politics at work, we lament the dying, the suffering, the cycle of violence done in our names. In the second person of the Trinity we find that person, both human and divine, who knows undeserved suffering. He is the divine Pain-Bearer, and human pain-bearers find refuge and meaning in Jesus. If the Creator is silent, expressed inarticulately through this world's created beauty, then God's Word, the Logos of God, is essentially speech, making sense in words of the wonder and pain of our existence. God's love is not like human love, because divine love never gets tired as we do, and never has a bad day as we do. But in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, we find in human form that divine love. Although Jesus' human body got tired, the love he expressed was never exhausted. Not even the ultimate human exhaustion of death could exhaust that love. Risen from the grave, rolling back the immense stone of human cynicism and doubt, Christ Jesus appeared again, encouraging the early community of believers.

To remind them of all he did and said, to remind us of the call to enjoy and share God's love Jesus promised to send an energy, a power more than mere memory, a Spirit unlimited by time and place, a Holy Spirit that works to overcome all human obstacles of language and culture. These cultural differences, far from being suppressed, are celebrated in the worship and witness of Christian communities around the world.

We humans can know some things about God, not directly, but by a reasonable faith. In our spiritual experience, we don't go from the Father to the Son to the Spirit. The Creator is opaque to us, the person least able to be known by a limited human mind. Instead, we are first moved by the **Spirit** (in community or family, or in beauty). The Spirit's task is to remind us of what Christ Jesus said and did. And when we look more closely at Christ's words and deeds, we find he wants us to meet "Abba." And we do — for a moment, for a while. But weak humans can't take too much divinity. Something in us recoils from infinite love and understanding — we hide our faces. And we find ourselves distracted, or even sinful, needing a human model — Christ Jesus. And he in turn continues to send us the Holy Spirit to be our Advocate & Comfort.

Do you see the pattern? When we think about one person of the Trinity for a while, we soon find ourselves introduced to another divine person — and so on and on. Theologians

have a Greek word for this: *Perichoresis* — the “round dance” of the Trinity. The theologian Elizabeth Johnson brightens up this obscure theological image: *A divine round dance modeled on the rhythmic, predictable motions of a country folk dance [is] one way to portray the mutual indwelling and encircling of God's holy mystery.*

I'm going to conclude this sermon on Trinity Sunday with a whimsical reflection from a sermon of the 14th century Dominican preacher, Meister Eckhart. *“Do you want to know what goes in in the core of the Trinity? I will tell you. In the core of the Trinity, the Father laughs, and gives birth to the Son. The Son laughs back at the Father, and gives birth to the Spirit. The whole Trinity laughs, and gives birth to us.”*