

**SLD05.31.15 Trinity Sunday**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**John 16:12-15**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

**“Whatever”**

John 16: 12-15

‘I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, She will guide you into all the truth; for She will not speak on her own, but will speak whatever She hears, and She will declare to you the things that are to come. She will glorify me, because She will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that She will take what is mine and declare it to you. The word of the Lord.

Well, the grand procession of the Easter season is done, crowned by a delightful celebration last Sunday of Pentecost, that animating moment for the early disciples, and us latter day ones, when we finally *get* the Holy Spirit, as well as get gotten by Her. Pentecost is when Jesus’ disciples tilt from the mind toward the heart, from the brain toward the body, and from lofty thoughts to effective, generative actions. Like building a Madhouser hut.

Only there’s one more special Sunday on the liturgical calendar – today – Trinity Sunday – before we shift our attention toward that long stretch of ordinary time during which we explore our faith through the lives of so called ‘saints,’ of which we have a doozie of a line up this year. But before the saints comes our celebration of the doctrine of the Trinity: that three-for-one mystery that’s never made much sense to anybody but to which the church continues to cling because...well...because...well...I may not be the best candidate to make a case for the Trinity, since, as some of you may recall that, a couple years ago, I swore it. After decades of sincerely attempting to explicate the Trinity in some meaningful manner, by 2013, I officially gave it up. .

Surely by now most of you know about me that I really grapple with what I preach. That I immerse myself in the text and seek with determination whatever point of revelation the gospel holds for me, for you, for us in this community. It's not always easy to come by, that spark, that flash, that animating recognition of what God has in store for us this week. But came a time for the Trinity and me, that, well, the thrill was gone. To be sure, we remain old friends; we just don't revel in one another's company the way we used to. And, frankly, I can't say we miss each other all that much.

Which is why, back on Sunday, May 26, 2013, in a sermon entitled, 'What More Can I Say?', " I proclaimed that unless the Holy Spirit jumped my cables, or yours, I was done preaching about the Trinity. You want a good sermon about the Trinity, somebody else was gonna have to do it. And sure enough, in 2014, Tom offered just that – a fine and faithful sermon on the Trio. Thing is, this year, Tom was on vacation....

Nevertheless, like a long lost, and not very likeable, second cousin at a dreaded but unavoidable family reunion, Trinity Sunday raised its hand anyway and waved for attention. So here I am, yet again, despite my best intentions.

Now, to be fair, prior to my doctrinal annulment back in 2013, I offered a fairly thorough survey of my own 'not too bad' attempts over the decades to preach about Trinity. Indeed, I refer you to our website for myriad homiletical exposes on the history of the doctrine; the 4<sup>th</sup> century debates that gave rise to it; what those early church fathers were trying to assert; what they were trying to protect; and what they did to people who didn't agree with them. It's all there.

Pick up any book on the history of the development of Christian thought to see just how much effort, and how many lives, have gone down over the millenia to ensure

that we believe that God reveals God's Self through three communal, coexistent, and co-equal 'persons,' whether or not this makes any sense to our post-modern minds. Truly, over the centuries, the Trinity's mattered a lot to Christians. Today...maybe not so much. At least to me. Hence the title of today's sermon, arguably a cop out but genuinely sincere - "Whatever." Note, too, if you will, the pathos of the bulletin cover Heather chose. Gosh, she's good.

At an inaugural address a couple presidents ago at Columbia Seminary, theologian Brian Wren noted that "the doctrine of the Trinity is...widely perceived as unnecessary, unintelligible, and unrelated to the *practice* of Christian faith. ...At the day to day level it is nonfunctional. (While Trinitarian doctrine may be) central to the *meaning* of Christian faith, (it remains) marginal to its *practice*." 'Course Wren then goes on persuasively to argue for the centrality and dynamic importance to the Christian faith of the doctrine of the Trinity. See my sermon on June of 2001 for *that* polemic.

You get the idea. Regarding Trinitarian doctrine, not only have you and I already covered most of the bases, for me that river's run dry. Still, given its dignified history and contributions to the development of Christian thought, perhaps my indifference will rile some of you enough to defend Trinitarian doctrine. That'd be good; I'm prepared to be inspired. Bring it on.

Meanwhile, I join Wren in warning against inflexible use of the traditional Trinitarian formula like "an old man, a young man, and a third thing," (Gail Ramshaw), or an all-male, one parent family with either a resident phantom, if we say Ghost, or a sip of Bourbon, if we say Spirit.

Am I just getting lazy? Bored? Wearily anti-establishment? Arguably. But might it not also be that, as we mature in faith, we find ourselves more patient with Mystery, less insistent on dogma, more deeply drawn to the experience of the Presence than any theological palaver *about* it? Might our post-post-modern minds finally be loosening their grip on dualistic dogma? As Coleman Barks remarks, ‘whatever we say about God necessarily makes of God something finite, such that, as he says, “...in the embrace of living fullness... the language-shuffling mind remains frustrated....’<sup>1</sup> St. Augustine put it more bluntly: “If you think you have understood God, it is not God.” Maybe some part of our seeking souls wearies with words and certitudes.

But then I remember an attitude I cultivated in seminary toward the wildly varying doctrines to which I was exposed, words and certitudes asserted throughout Christian history by whoever happened to be in charge at the moment. And what I came to appreciate, respectfully, is that, whether or not we agree with a given doctrine, whether or not it speak to or satisfies our deepest understandings, most thoughtful theological assertions do carry *some* truth, *some* challenge, *some* corrective to whoever we are and whatever it is we think we know.

After all, is not each understanding of God, of humanity, of the church, of grace and sin, rooted at least in honest wrestling if not revelation? So if we 21<sup>st</sup> century seekers are committed always to test and question ‘truth,’ yet it also behooves us to remain open and humble before others’ formulations of it. Not because any given dogma is necessarily true for all persons at all times but, born as it is of others’ efforts to

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<sup>1</sup> Coleman Barks and John Moyne, *The Drowned Book*, Ecstatic and Earthy Reflections of Bahauudin, the Father of Rumi. HarperSanFrancisco, 2005, p. 133.

grapple with God, it should we not at least ask what truth it might carry for us if we were not threatened, or offended, or crazed, by it?

Whether or not we concur with the broadcast pronouncements of the European white boys in charge of theology over the last few centuries, is it too much at least to imagine sincerity of faith or revelation at the core of their insistent doctrine? Have not seekers throughout the ages struggled sincerely with understanding the Holy, and how best to integrate it into their lives? Even if we reject absolutes, what, in the hammering out of their faith, is any given theologian, yesterday or today, trying to assert? Trying to correct? Trying to protect?

The development of the doctrine of the Trinity, for example, could be described as asserting the relational nature of God, the variety of ways the Creator interacts with the Creation, as well as both the immanence and the transcendence of the Source of Life. Early on controversies around the Trinity tackled the nature of Jesus: fully human and fully divine, were the winners of that debate, even if it didn't make any sense to anybody. Why? Because where one stood on the divine/human continuum affected deeply how the community came to understand the nature of God's love, the power of God's judgment, the wisdom of Jesus' teaching, the profundity of his bodily sacrifice.

These may not be today's burning questions, but even I have to admit this doesn't mean there isn't any truth to be mined from Trinitarian doctrine.

Christian Wiman notes that one criteria by which we can judge the authenticity and relevance of a spiritual insight is by the extent to which it demands uncomfortable change of us.<sup>2</sup> That is, what might our *personal* stakes be in the game? What might our relationship with a particular doctrine be if we were required less to accept it than to

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<sup>2</sup> Christian Wiman, The Bright Abyss, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2013, p. 131.

challenge and dialogue with it? What, then, would we be trying to assert? To correct?  
To protect?

For example, what do we lose and what do we gain, by experimenting with alternative language for the Trinity? Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. Mother, Child, Womb? Love Lover, Beloved? Rock, Redeemer, Friend? Glory, Peace, Love?<sup>3</sup>

How annoyed do you feel when some progressive pastor throws a female into the Trinity, like I did for today's reading, referencing the Holy Spirit as 'She?' Why might it be important for me to do that? Why might it be important to some that I *not* do that? Thirty years ago when Central Church changed the language of the Doxology to be more inclusive, my father sang out the traditional verbiage even more loudly. There are some in this communion who still do this. What's at stake? What are we trying to assert? What are we trying to protect?

What if, at each stage of the development of our personal faith journeys we were each required to come up with a holy Triad of our own to capture most authentically for us personally the relational mystery of God? Might our Triad change over time? Or would it stay the same? Why, or why not?

Or, what if we Trinitarians went rogue Unitarian and simply eliminated J.C. and the Holy Spirit from the mix altogether? What would be gained? What would be lost? What sort of uncomfortable change would be demanded of us?

Maybe this or that traditional doctrine doesn't speak for, or to, some of us anymore. But ask yourself what you'd come up with on your own.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/religion/2006-06-19-presbyterians\\_x.htm](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/religion/2006-06-19-presbyterians_x.htm)

guide you into all the truth; for She will not speak on her own, but will speak whatever She hears, and She will declare to you the things that are to come. She will glorify me, because She will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that God has is mine. For this reason I said that She will take what is mine and declare it to you.”

We may not favor universal absolutes anymore but we're no less accountable to the questions that animate them through the ages. Just who is God to you? What's your relationship with Jesus? Just how does the Holy Spirit enliven your life? And how, in your mind, in your imagination, in your faith, do these three relate to one another? Questions demanding a lifetime to sort through, even if, or perhaps, particularly when, they make us uncomfortable.

To the glory of God. Amen.