

SERMON BY THE REV. BETSY JOHNS ROADMAN, 5/22/05
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TRINITY SUNDAY; TEXT: MATTHEW 28:16-20

It's Trinity Sunday – a preacher's worst nightmare. It's the day in the liturgical calendar when we're expected to wrestle with the doctrine of the Trinity: One God, who is not only three persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – but also has three functions – Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of life. I've done a lot of reading this week, to try to learn from others just how they've come to understand and articulate this doctrine. My favorite comments come from Episcopal priest and writer, Barbara Brown Taylor, whom I quoted in last week's sermon as well. She affirms the difficulty of understanding the concept of the Trinity when she articulates our own unspoken questions: “Why does one God need three names? How does one God inhabit three forms? How can God be both three and one?”

She notes, “The Bible often compounds the problem by making it sound as if all three operate independently of one another. ‘Now I am going to him who sent me,’ Jesus says in the sixteenth chapter of John's gospel. ‘Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you ...’ ”

We can identify with Taylor's exasperation as she writes, “Who are all these people? How can God the Father be his own son? And if Jesus is God, then whom is he talking to? And where does the Holy Spirit come in? Is that the spirit of God, the spirit of Jesus, or someone else altogether? If they are all one, then why do they come and go at different times, and how can one of them send another of them?”

Taylor offers the honest conclusion that there are complex theological answers to all of these questions, but that she really doesn't understand any of them. “I accept them as earnest human efforts to describe something that cannot ever be described, which is the nature of God,” she says. “The best any of us have ever been able to do is to describe what the experience of God is like ... to confess what it is like when we are in the presence of God.”¹

All evidence to the contrary, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity wasn't dreamed up by some ancient scholars in order to thoroughly confuse the faithful for generations to come. It was a sincere attempt on the part of followers of Christ to understand, articulate, and communicate the essence of God's relational character, God's presence, and God's work in the world. It's exactly what Christians in every generation have had to struggle with anew, in their own unique context, in order to make sense of and to fully engage their own faith. And then, coming to some understanding of who this God is, each generation of Christians must respond to God, living out their faith authentically, in their own unique context.

¹ *Home By Another Way*, pp. 152-3.

The concept of the one God in three persons, though not specifically labeled the Trinity, is found in today's reading from the book of Matthew, as part of a clear and direct statement of how faith in God should be lived out. Jesus commissions his disciples to go into the world, making disciples as they have been made disciples by him, baptizing the new disciples in the name of this one, relational God who is, somehow, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They're to teach these new disciples to obey all that Jesus has taught them.

This is one of those passages of scripture in which it's tempting to imagine ourselves right in the middle of this scenario, receiving the words of Jesus' commission to the first disciples as a call that, word for word, is ours as well. Yet, the context of our lives is very different than was that of the first followers of Jesus. No matter where those disciples went, they'd find themselves in the midst of people who had never heard of Jesus and were completely unfamiliar with his teachings or his works. The first disciples were talking about something new, and what's new usually piques peoples' interest. And they were dealing with something quite dangerous – literally putting their lives on the line to follow Jesus, which added urgency and intensity to the carrying out of this commission.

That is clearly not our context. For many of the people we encounter, Christianity is simply a given, a kind of cultural norm. While its practice may not be deeply intentional for many, it is, at least, vaguely familiar. So, is this Great Commission of Jesus – his call for a response to the character, presence, and work of God – irrelevant for those of us who will not be traveling to remote areas of the world where the good news of God in Jesus Christ still may not be known?

I'd like to suggest that a restating of Jesus' commission in Matthew, relevant for us in our own unique context as we seek to respond to God, might go something like this: Jesus says, "In all of your spheres of influence – your family, your work, your community, your travel – live in a way that shows others what it's like to be in the presence of God. As my followers, do that by so internalizing my teachings that your very lives embody them. Draw into the community of faith those who are hovering around the margins. Be prepared to bear witness to the hope on which your life is based, both through your actions and your words."

We claim to be Christians – followers of Christ. Yet, how many of us do take the teachings of Jesus so seriously that they have real impact on our daily lives? We need to know and to wrestle with what Jesus taught if we claim to be his followers. His teachings are just as profound today as they were 2000 years ago. Let me give you a couple of personal examples.

Jesus said, "Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you (Matthew 5:42). Can I, with any integrity, simply walk past someone who asks me for money on Madison Avenue, knowing that I'm heading to a fairly expensive lunch with a friend at an upscale restaurant?"

Jesus taught, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). I can pray for protection from terrorists. I can pray for their victims. But can I possibly love those terrorists themselves and pray for them? Jesus says yes.

Jesus said, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth ... but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven ... for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matthew 6:19-21). Am I being called to give away more of my income, not only to help those who have so much less than I have, but also because I have some lessons to learn about heavenly treasures?

The Great Commission reminds us that being Christians is not something that we casually claim. As followers of Christ, we, like the earliest disciples, are called to know, to grapple with, and to live out what Jesus himself taught.

This is hard stuff. But this same Jesus, whose authority comes directly from God and who commissions his followers to do what feels humanly impossible, promises to be with us in it and to empower us for it. I can't begin to explain how all of that works, but the promise is there ... as is our personal and communal knowledge and experience of the abundant love and power of this relational, trinitarian God.

So, in our spheres of influence – our families, our work, our communities, our travel – may we live in a way that shows others what it's like to be in the presence of God. May we so internalize the teachings of Jesus that our very lives embody them. May we draw into our faith community those who are hovering around the margins. May we, as individuals and as a community of faith, be prepared to bear witness to the hope on which our lives are based, both through our actions and our words. In this way, may we be disciples of Christ and make disciples of Christ. Amen.