

5-31-26 sermon

Matthew 28.16-20

It is Trinity Sunday. Less commonly known as “Bad Math Sunday,” the day when the church boldly declares that:

$$1 + 1 + 1 = 1.$$

The origins of Trinity Sunday go back to the fourth century, to what is called “the Arian heresy.” Arius was a priest in Cyrene, in modern-day Libya. He was the most prominent in a chorus of voices arguing that when Paul calls Jesus “the firstborn of all creation,” that means Jesus was the very first created being, and therefore *not* God. And so God could not exist as what was called “the Holy Trinity.” The controversy spread, and was finally resolved at the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, which affirmed that the One God existed in three persons, called the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, which became the foundational structure of the Nicene Creed, and then the Apostles’ Creed. The belief we affirm regularly in worship whenever we speak the words of those ancient creeds.

The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity is one of the unique aspects of the Christian faith, and one which the church decided needed to have its own feast day. In the Eastern Church, they celebrate the Holy Trinity on the Day of Pentecost. The Western Church settled on the Sunday after Pentecost, and so here we are today. And that’s the history lesson for today! But settling one heresy was not without consequences that have been problematic. The doctrine of the blessed Holy Trinity can be a two-edged sword, because the temptation is to make the Trinity *the* defining declaration of who God is, primarily because it *is* what distinguishes the Christian faith from other major religions. Yet the bible identifies God in so many other ways, with so many other images, none of which have gained the prominence of the image of the Holy Trinity.

This description of God as three persons in one – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – centers *male* relationships and has been used to uphold patriarchy down through the centuries, and still is today in certain quarters. We call Jesus “the son of man,” a title that doubles down on maleness, even when it’s possible to translate that title as “the son of woman,” especially given that his humanity comes from his mother, not from Joseph. Another thing to note is that nowhere in scripture do we find the word “trinity.” It’s simply the English word that describes this foundational theological doctrine of the church. The word itself comes from the Latin word, ‘trinitas,’ which means, “triad” or “the state of being threefold. The only time in scripture where we find the trinitarian formula – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – explicitly named, is in the Gospel passage I read this morning, when Jesus instructs his disciples, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Which are the names in which we baptize people today – as we have done on the past two Sundays.

What I find interesting, is that when we read the Acts of the Apostles, when the disciples baptize people, they do not baptize people with the Trinitarian formula. They baptize people

in the name of Jesus Christ. Now either they forgot what Jesus told them; or they disobeyed what Jesus commanded; or the trinitarian formula is a later addition to Matthew's Gospel, added after the church began to baptize people in the name of the Triune God and not just in the name of Jesus. I suspect it's probably the latter.

Now, let me be very clear: I absolutely believe in the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. I believe in the Triune God. But I *also* believe the prominence of that way of describing God has caused a great deal of harm down through the years, because of its underpinning of the kind of patriarchy that continues to plague the church. A patriarchy that is rooted in an understanding of power and authority as coercive, as controlling, as standing over and above others. The kind of patriarchy that delights in verses that say, "children obey your parents," but skips over verses like, "fathers, do not exasperate your children." The kind of patriarchy that points a finger at the page of the bible and says, "wives submit yourselves to your husbands," while using that finger to cover up the verse that immediately precedes that one, which says, "Submit yourselves to one another because of your reverence for Christ." There's no question that the Trinitarian formula we find here at the end of Matthew's Gospel has been used to support the patriarchy.

I wonder what Matthew would have made of that?

Obviously, he lived in a society rooted in patriarchy, and in an empire ruled by the *pater familias*, Caesar, the Father of Rome. So, calling God "Father" would have been natural. Ah, but what *kind* of father? "He who must be obeyed"? The One whose finger is always hovering over the 'smite' button? All-powerful in the way we tend to think of power: as the ability to get our way? And what does Matthew want us to understand about Jesus, the Son? If we pay close attention to how Matthew tells the story of Jesus in his Gospel, would we land on *patriarchy* as the natural outcome of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity?

Well, it would appear that Matthew wants us to understand something about the identity of Jesus from the very beginning, when he says,

"All this took place to fulfill what the Lord has said through the prophet Isaiah, 'The virgin shall conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him 'Emmanuel' (which means "God with us.")

Which are the very words with which Matthew leaves us, when Jesus says, "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." So Matthew appears to be making a strong claim that Jesus *is* God, with us. Jesus meets his disciples "on the mountain to which he had directed them," and he begins his parting speech to the disciples with these words: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."

He makes this claim *after* his public ministry. *After* his execution and *after* his resurrection. *Now* all authority has been given to him. But remember, he was offered all authority – all power – before he even *began* his public ministry, when the devil took him to a mountain and "showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor." "All this I will give you," Satan said, "if you will bow down and worship me." "I can give you authority over the whole

world – just bow your knee to me.” But Jesus sent Satan packing. And thus began three years of embodying a very different kind of power. One that rejected what Satan offered him, the power of the tyrant, and instead embraced the power of God, which is not coercive, but is – in fact – the power of love. Jesus could have been given the whole world, and avoided the price he would ultimately pay for living a life of love – death on a Roman cross – but only at a far greater price – becoming a tyrant himself.

It’s been a while since I’ve made a reference to the Lord of the Rings from the pulpit, but I think that same temptation lies at the heart of Tolkien’s epic. Because when Gandalf and the Lady Galadriel are offered the One Ring, the Ring of Power, they say similar things:

“Don’t tempt me, Frodo. I would use this ring from a desire to do good, but *through* me it would wield a power too great and terrible to imagine.”

The lady Galadriel was even more explicit than Gandalf:

“In place of a dark lord, you will have a queen!

Not dark, but beautiful and terrible as the dawn.

Treacherous as the sea! Stronger than the foundations of the earth!

All shall love me and despair!”

Jesus rejected the easier path to authority and power that Satan offered, in part, I believe, because it was the wrong *kind* of power. Throughout his life, Jesus could have seized that kind of power. He could have led a revolt against the Jerusalem elite and the Romans. The crowds who followed him would have leapt at the opportunity. They wanted that kind of Messiah. But Jesus consistently rejected violence as a means to an end. Rejected that understanding of messiah, of king, or emperor. And it is only when all possibility of him being made king by force is gone, when he stands alone before Pilate – the emperor’s representative – who asks him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” that Jesus finally says, “Yes.” And then says nothing more to defend himself from the power of the tyrant. He does not call legions of angels to rescue him, but submits himself to the power of the Temple elite and the power of Rome, and is executed under their tyrannical rule. Jesus has resisted the temptation to authoritarian rule, to become just another tyrant in a long line of tyrants, and in so doing, “all authority in heaven and on earth has *now* been given to him.” In his death on the cross, and in his resurrection, he has defeated tyranny itself, and the ultimate tyranny of death itself. His is the authority under which *life* – God’s new life – can flourish.

And now he commissions his disciples to “Go, therefore, and make disciples among all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them *to obey* all that I have commanded you.” To obey. It is the *doing* that matters, not the knowing. Ultimately to obey the great commandment, “To love God, and to love your neighbor as yourself.” And – John would chime in – to love one another as I have loved you.” To embody the Way of love, not the way of the tyrant. Not to seek coercive power *over* others, but the power of love to *serve* others, which leads to our mutual transformation. To reject

all forms of authoritarianism, all forms of tyranny, and especially to resist the temptation to use coercive power “for good,” because it cannot be used so.

On this Trinity Sunday, may we remember that the Trinitarian formula of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is just *one* way to identify God, to understand the nature of God, and a way that has been used – and still *is* being used – to justify wielding oppressive power over others. That Jesus himself rejected that kind of power, instead, embodied the power of love, and *not* the power of the tyrant.

And may we remember that anyone who attempts to use the name of Jesus to wield coercive power, to justify their own authoritarian aspirations, to support patriarchy in any of its forms, has yielded to the temptation that Jesus rejected. And any government that says Christians must line up behind their actions because they’re doing it in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, but whose actions stand in direct opposition to all that Jesus commanded his disciples to do; a government that would put people in harm’s way for a “Holy War;” a government that offers to privilege the Christian faith over any other; is merely echoing the temptation that the devil offered Jesus. For that is not the kind of authority that Jesus wielded. *That* is the power of the One Ring, that must be resisted, rejected and replaced with the power Jesus offers: the power of love.

Matthew ends his account of the life of Jesus by telling us we have been commissioned to tell the story of the God who loves us, the God who *is* Love, the God who bids us love one another, world without end. Amen