

Ephesians 4: 1-6
Matthew 28: 16-20
June 11, 2017
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
Trinity Sunday

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity is the most mysterious and controversial dogmas of our religion. But the problem is not with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The problem is with doctrine, dogma and orthodoxy.

Only once, in the passage we just heard from Matthew's gospel, does Jesus put the three "persons" of the trinity into a ritual formula. Nowhere in the gospels is anyone baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is given for the forgiveness of sins. It is a rite of renunciation of the claims of the world and an entrance into a life submitted to the rule of God—what Jesus called the Kingdom of God.

Everywhere else in the old and new testaments there is clearly God the creator. There is a Spirit which moves at the breath of God and there is a Redeemer/Savior/Messiah. The Hebrew scriptures announce the coming of the messiah. The Christian scriptures announce that in Jesus of Nazareth the messiah has come. Jews and Christians disagree about the identity of the messiah. But we both acknowledge the promise of God to be revealed in human form.

My suggestion to you is this: the scriptures speak of God the Father/Creator, the Spirit of God and the messiah because that is how faithful people *experienced* their encounter with what theologian Rudolph Otto called, "the tremendous and fascinating mystery." This is the divine reality which lives independent of all words and yet touches and moves the lives of all creation.

Properly understood the Bible is a record of that experience. It is an interpretation of human life and history in light of this vast mystery which is beyond human comprehension. It is a record of our very human response to God the creator of all life. It is a record of our very

human response to how the Spirit of God moved among people of faith in the past. It is a very human witness to the faith of Israel that there is a messiah who will come but who is yet to come. It is a very human witness to the faith of Christians that, in Jesus of Nazareth, son of Joseph and Mary, the messiah *has* come.

At the same time these very human records of our encounters with the tremendous and fascinating mystery point us to how God is the creator of *our lives*; they make us aware of the presence of God's Spirit which moves *our lives* individually and as communities. And, for us who accept the proclamation that Jesus is the Christ and experience God's great love through faith in him, the scriptures continually point us to Jesus as the way of God the truth of God and the life of God.

As a result of these experiences of God we become the living scriptures which point beyond ourselves to the powerful unconditional love which is essence of the One we call God.

One way to think about is this—I am a person in my own right. But I am also a husband and a father. I hope that my wife and children experience me as a good husband and father. But even more than that I hope they will come to know *me*. A human being named Stewart. To me it's that simple. I love the apostle Paul because he is so human. He is a publicly proclaimed flawed human being who prays that his life and words will point beyond himself to the mystery which literally knocked him for a loop and transformed his life. Listen again to the beautiful, even poetic, words of this morning's reading:

I therefore, a prisoner in the Lord, *beg you* to lead a life worthy of the call to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of *the Spirit* in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling. one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who

is above all and in all.

Here Paul speaks of the three aspects by which we experience the one God. He manages to identify their distinctness without forcing them together in a tight fitting absolute. We are able to notice the Spirit which is the bond of peace; the Lord who is the revealer of the goodness of God and the God and father of us all who is above all and in all. It is beautiful and evocative.

But human beings cannot live with mystery. We have to make certain that we have it *right*. *God forbid that we get it wrong*—whatever *it* is. We have to defend this right interpretation against the experiences of others which do not conform to our experience. This is what happened over the course of the first four centuries of the church. The God who is experienced in three distinct ways all mysteriously working together became *the Trinity* of the Nicene Creed. Theologians became obsessed with defending the doctrine of the Trinity against Jewish believers and later, those of Islam. And, more obsessively, they tried to nail down *just how* the Father, Son and Holy Spirit related to one another. The result was the elevation of right belief over experience, assent to propositions over intuition and the creation of heretics whose refusal to step into line resulted all too often in persecution and execution.

Friends, the Sufi poet Rumi speaks of the liberating experience of standing on an open plain and removing what we recognize as shoes too small for our feet. Allow yourselves to remove those shoes which cause you to feel spiritually cramped. Feel the release and breathe fresh air now that you aren't wincing at the pinching of your shoes.

You are not denying the Father the Son or the Holy Spirit. You are inviting them to live in you and through you freely and joyfully. Amen.