

"For Heidi"
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Galatians 3:23-29

June 20, 2010
San Dimas Community Church, UCC

This sermon is "for Heidi" because for a long time she's wanted me to preach on the Trinity. Fortunately, Stan, my father-in-law, recently wrote a theological paper on the Trinity, and his words flow in and through this text. And there's a few copies of Stan's paper available on the back table if you want to read more.

When we speak of the Trinity, we are referring to "God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit" (some say "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost"). Part of the reason I don't often address the Trinity is because you don't find the doctrine in the Christian scriptures.

The Trinity as a doctrine appears in church history as a document produced by the Council of Nicea in 325 AD. You may have learned or recited the "Nicene Creed" sometime in your religious experience. Before about 300 AD, Christianity was a minority and persecuted religion until the Emperor Constantine became a Christian: and since "as goes the Emperor so goes the Empire," the persecution of Christianity ceased. However, Constantine was concerned with keeping the peace in his realm, and even Christians (if you can imagine) had internal conflicts and controversies that presented threats to peace.

A major dispute arose over the status and role of Christ as promoted by a much respected church elder named Arius of Alexandria. Remember that after Jesus, the church was in its infancy of faith formation. They (as we do even today) asked the question: Who was Jesus? Was he God or human? Arius said that Jesus was the bridge that God created between the absolute God and the created world. Jesus would do the dirty work so that God's perfection would not be compromised. Jesus was *created* by God to be the Word made flesh for our redemption. Jesus is *less* than God as God's creation, but he is a bit more than human, for he was created first and directly. So God remains unsullied by contact with the world, and humans are redeemed.

However, this vision of Jesus was troubling to some other Christians, so the Nicene delegates caucused and fought and argued and voted, and these are some of their final words:

I believe in one God... maker of heaven and earth... And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God... God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made.

As Stan notes, "On those words hung the church's future. If Jesus is 'made,' that is, a creature of God's, then he is a go-between, mediator, as Arius taught. However exalted, Jesus remains a subordinate being, so that God can remain unsullied. No way, answered the majority [of the Nicene delegates]. God is not so exalted, infinite, alone in divine splendor, that God can deal with us only at arm's length. It is God *Godself* whom we meet in Jesus Christ. Jesus was not made but 'begotten' -- that is, Jesus comes from

God's own being. God loves us, not through an intermediary, but personally. In Jesus, the love of God has become flesh."

Then Stan tells a story from Kierkegaard, the famous theologian. What if a handsome prince fell in love with a lowly peasant maiden who lives in the village nearby. The prince has a problem. If he appeared at her door to confess his love, the poor girl would be overwhelmed. Her station in life is so humble, and his so great, there is a great chasm between them. If she married him, he could never be sure that her willingness is born of love or duty. Could he send an emissary of some kind who would negotiate with her some way to ease her into the relationship? The Prince could not imagine such a thing. There was only one thing he could do. He could become a peasant himself. Then if he won her, it would be because her love was freely given.

Or we might consider Paul's famous line in Philippians 5:5ff "...And he emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave..."

Though the Nicene Creed also includes the Holy Spirit, it didn't carry the controversial weight of the Jesus question: everyone agreed that the Holy Spirit was an aspect of God. So, there you have it -- Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit, the three in One, the TRINITY!

There are two things I think are important about this discussion of the Trinity. First, the church throughout history has grappled, argued, and disagreed and still remained the church. So we need not fear to do the same. We don't have to get it exactly right because God gets it right. The Divine meets us where we are in myriad ways because God wants us; indeed, the rabbis said that God created because God was lonely.

Secondly, there is a relational, communal essence to the Trinity. God is not alone and elsewhere but dwells in relationship with the three in one and with the whole creation.

Now just because the doctrine of the Trinity has stood the test of time, it does not mean that we are not to consider anew and make meaningful for our time God, Christ, and Holy Spirit. To that end, the United Church of Christ has published some little pocket tracts of which we happen to have some, and I want to read a little from them.

The first is *16 reasons I love God*. Here are some of the 16:

*Because when I live as though God is real, my life just works better.

*Because the first time I looked at my daughter, I was so full of gratitude I had to give it to somebody, and God was there to receive it.

*Because God first loved me.

*Because God's ways are not my ways and God's thought are not my thoughts and that's a really good thing for everybody concerned.

*Because God keeps promises.

*Because God will never leave me alone, even when I want God to.

*Because I heard somewhere that some Jews in Auschwitz put God on trial, accusing God of cruelty and betrayal. There was a prosecution, and a defense, and a jury, and in the end, they found God guilty. Then they said their evening prayers.

*Because sometimes, when I sing about God, it makes me cry and I don't know why.

Here's a few lines from *16 Reasons I Love Jesus*:

*Jesus shows me what God is like in ways I can understand.

*Because when other people can't forgive me, Jesus does.

*Because of Jesus, nothing I experience is strange to God.

*Jesus helps me relate to God as a loving parent instead of a distant deity.

*Because something about his boldness gives courage even to me.

*I love Jesus because he descended into hell, and I've been there, too.

*Because his crucifixion and resurrection show me that death does not get the last word.

*Because Jesus welcomed the little children, and not all of them would have been well-behaved.

And from *16 Reasons I Love the Holy Spirit*:

*The Holy Spirit whispers loudly to get us to listen quietly.

*The Spirit calls me to step from spectator in the stands to player on the field.

*When I feel I'm falling, suddenly there's a net from somewhere, and I am safe again.

*Because through the Spirit, God can work through me, even me.

*Because one of the names for the Spirit is Comforter.

*Because she never lets the words of the Bible lie dead on the page.

*The Spirit can turn my enemies into my friends.

Isn't it great to know that the Holy One wants to be in relationship with us so much that God tries every way possible to reach us, yes, even through the doctrine of the Trinity. Thanks be to God!