

Sermon: Holy Community Text Matthew 28:16-20 Trinity and Confirmation Sunday

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa ON Rev. Steve Clifton

It's Trinity Sunday. It's the only day of the liturgical year dedicated to a theological concept. Easter, Pentecost, Christmas- these days celebrate events. Trinity Sunday could be all about ideas, a day to we think about the nature of God and the uniquely Christian concept of the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity goes something like this... in the words of the Athanasian Creed: "the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, and yet there are not three Gods but one God." The Christian God is one God but three persons: "Father, Son and Holy Spirit". Or as Augustine wrote long ago: "Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer...."

How do we explain the idea of the Holy Trinity? On Trinity Sunday as we speak about the Trinity, it's pretty hard not to stray from the correct theological path. It's really hard not to express a heresy or two.

For instance, I could tell you that God as Trinity is like water in its three forms. It can be a solid- ice, or vapour, or a liquid- but it's all water. But that explanation of the Trinity is an old heresy called Modalism- that God is not three persons but is one and is revealed in three different forms. This heresy was condemned at the Council of Constantinople way back in 381.

Or I could follow St Patrick's lead and talk about a Shamrock, a 3 leaf clover, and how the Triune God is like that... but that would be the heresy of Partialism, the idea that the three persons of the Trinity are not separate persons but are simply three aspects of One God. If St Patrick has trouble speaking of the Trinity without expressing a heresy, what hope do I have?

We could stay out of trouble and talk, not of the nature of Trinity, but of the application or the relevance of the idea. The Trinity, God in three persons, puts relationship at the heart of God. Our God is all about community. God is not distant or indifferent, rather, relationship is in the very fabric of the divine nature. God is a community, a relationship - One in three and three in One.



So how about a picture of the Trinity. This painting is a 14th C Russian Icon. It shows three heavenly beings- note the halos and the wings... The three are sitting at a table sharing a meal. This image draws on a story in Genesis where Abraham offers hospitality to three unexpected guests. The text says the visitor was “the Lord.”

This painting is an image of hospitality, depicting the importance of making the stranger welcome. But scholars say there is something missing from the painting. The original icon held a small mirror located at the near edge of the table. You would see your own face in the artwork. The viewer too is welcome at the table. In the painting you would be there at table with the Holy trinity. The Trinity is about relationship and community.

Today is Confirmation Sunday. There was a time when Confirmation was largely about ideas. You studied a catechism, a written explanation of a particular theology. Maybe you memorized things that you had to profess. Maybe you were tested or examined about your beliefs. The young people being confirmed today haven't memorized anything. But they know a lot of things. We must have good Sunday School teachers because these young people are biblically literate, more than I was at their age. In the space of ten minutes they can give you a detailed overview of Calvinism and then express ideas that are grounded in feminist theology. They ask profound questions and suggest novel answers. But confirmation isn't just about ideas and knowledge. It's about relationships. It's about being part of our community of faith.

In *The Case for God*, Karen Armstrong explains that faith groups being concerned first with ideas and with believing the right thing is a recent development. Until the past few centuries the major Western monotheisms all concerned themselves primarily with *practice*, the doing of religion, rather than doctrine. A good Muslim was one who stood alongside and supported the 7 Pillars; a good Jew observed Sabbath and remained committed to the Law and the ritual year; and a good Christian embodied the Sermon on the Mount by caring for the marginalized, promoting compassion and peace, and sharing God's love. This is what it meant to be religious, Armstrong explains.

Christianity isn't first and foremost about ideas. It's about relationships. It's about how we live together. It's about loving God and neighbor. And we see in God, in the Trinity, a model for living together in Holy Community.

Let me share a story that makes the point in its own way.

An old established Church celebrated its 200th anniversary and wanted a speaker to suit the occasion.

So they invited the abbot of a local monastery to give a series of 3 sermons to celebrate the grand occasion.

Anticipation built up as the time drew near and everyone was excited as the wise old monk mounted the pulpit steps on the first of the three Sundays.

He began to speak: "How many of you here today know what I am about to say?" No one raised their hands. So he continued: "If no one knows what I am going to say there is no point in my saying it. Let's be silent." And he sat down. After the service as he drove the abbot home, the church anniversary chairperson suggested the abbot feel free to speak longer next week.

Back at the church they had a plan to ensure that the monk would say more. Everyone was ready as the wise old monk mounted the pulpit steps on the 2nd of the three Sundays.

He began to speak: "How many of you here today know what I am about to say?" This time they were ready and everyone raised their hands. So he continued: "If everyone knows what I am going to say there is no point in my saying it. Let's be silent." And he sat down.

After the service as he drove the abbot home, the church anniversary chair suggested that abbot offer something more on the last Sunday.

And back at the church a new plan was developed.

All was ready on the final Sunday as the wise old monk mounted the pulpit steps on the last of the three Sundays.

He began to speak: "How many of you here today know what I am about to say?" This time all the people on the left raised their hands and all the people on right kept their hands down. So the abbot continued: "Let's have everyone on the left hand of the church tell everyone on the right side what they know." And he sat down. After the service as he drove the abbot home, the church anniversary chairperson said- "Father Abbot- that was a great sermon that you gave today!"

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer and Spirit, One.