

**Oysters and a Ballerina\***  
**John 16:5-15**  
**Trinity Sunday**  
**May 30, 2010**  
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**Omaha, Nebraska**

The first book I ever read on preaching was entitled, as I recall (it was during my first semester of seminary) *A Word on Words*. It was a gentle, humorous, and insightful reflection on the joys and burdens of preaching written by an Episcopalian priest. One of the things the author said was that most preachers end up tying themselves into verbal and theological knots when they try to preach on the Trinity; the best thing to do, he advised, was to plan to be sick or out of town every year on Trinity Sunday.

Being from a non-liturgical church, I did not have to go so far as pretend to be sick, but I have always taken this advice to heart and found something else to preach on on this Sunday after Pentecost, which is traditionally Trinity Sunday. That is, until today. For some reason—possibly the prompting of the Holy Spirit, possibly insanity—I just felt called to preach today on that puzzling, complicated, problematic theological doctrine called the Trinity.

Disciples, historically, are notoriously uninterested in the Trinity. At least one of our founders, Barton Stone, called the whole doctrine into question. And we Disciples, on the whole, tend to steer away from the speculative metaphysics that lie behind the doctrine of the Trinity. But this concept, the notion of God in three persons—Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, or more traditionally, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is one that we inherit from nearly 2000 years of Christian tradition. Without thinking much about it,

we are Trinitarian in our theology. We sing hymns that use Trinitarian language, and every week in our 8:15 and 11:00 service offer glory and praise to the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. We pray to God as Father and Creator, but we also address our prayers to Jesus Christ, our Savior, and to the Sustaining and Loving and Ever-present Spirit.

So if we are going to speak to and about God using Trinitarian language, we probably ought to have some tiny little sense of what we mean when we do this.

But first, a very brief history of how we came to have this puzzling, mystifying, and perplexing idea of One God in three persons. The Bible never speaks of God as trinity, though it uses some Trinitarian language. For instance, at the end of the gospel of Matthew, Jesus instructs his disciples to baptize in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

But passages like the one we just read from John, even as they talk about the three persons of God, create problems. They make it sound as if the three persons of the Trinity operate independently from each other. “Now I am going to him who sent me,” Jesus says. “If I do not go away, the Advocate (the Holy Spirit) will not come to you, but if I go, I will send him to you.” And, finally, “All that the Father has is mine.”

As preacher Barbara Brown Taylor quite rightly asks, “*Who are all these people?* How can 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 it 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?” (*Home by Another Way*, p.152) The whole thing is just incredibly confusing.

The early church struggled to find answers to these kinds of questions. Christianity had inherited an absolute belief that there was only one God from Judaism, to non-Christians it looked like they were worshiping three gods. (Remember this was a time when the idea of only one god was a strange and radical one.)

And while every Christian agreed that they worshipped only one God, they explained the relationship between God the Father and God the Son differently (no one really got too worked up about the Holy Spirit). One faction said that the Father made the Son and the Spirit that the Son and the Spirit were less than the Father, and there had been a time when the other two persons of the Trinity did not exist. The Greek word for this position was *homoiousios*, which means similar substance.

The other faction insisted that the Father begot the Son and the Spirit, and that the three persons of the Trinity were co-equal expressions of one divine being. The Greek word that summed up this position was *homoousios*, which means same substance. The two words might be separated by one little vowel, but the theological chasm was enormous.

Now this might sound like a lot of theological mumbo-jumbo, but this disagreement was a very big deal. People would get into fights—I'm not talking about verbal discussions, but actual fist fights—screaming their respective positions. Homoousios! Homoiousios! Begotten! Created! The early church was threatened with schism. And because Christianity was on its way to becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire, the fight over this one little vowel threatened to divide the Empire.

So in 320 AD, the Roman Emperor Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea and told the church, “You guys figure this out.” The Council came up with a solution, a formula that explained the relationship between the three persons of the Trinity. This formula is what those of you who grew up in more liturgical traditions know as the Nicene Creed. The pivotal language in the creed is this,

*[We believe]...in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father...*

The *homoousios* party had won, and just to make it clear, the original version of the Creed concluded by saying “But those who say: *'There was a time when he was not;'* and *'He was not before he was made;'* and *'He was made out of nothing,'* or *'He is of another substance'* or *'essence,'* or *'The Son of God is created,'* or *'changeable,'* or *'alterable'*—they are condemned by the holy catholic and apostolic Church. In other words, take that!!

So 320 AD, the church got everything figured out—got God figured out. It was all settled. Or was it? The truth is, despite the most strenuous human efforts to pin God down to one neat little doctrine or one formula, despite all our best attempts at describing or explaining God, we always come up short. We are doomed to come up short. Robert Capon wrote that when human beings try to describe God we are like oysters trying to describe a ballerina. We simply do not have the equipment to understand something so utterly beyond us.

Augustine, who wrote in the fifth century, was one of the most influential theologians in the history of Christianity, including in further developing and explaining the doctrine of the Trinity. The story is told that shortly after Augustine finished his theological tome *On the Trinity*, he was walking along the Mediterranean shore on the coast of North Africa when he chanced upon a boy who kept filling a bucket with seawater and pouring it into a large hole in the sand.

"Why are you doing that?" Augustine asked the boy.

"I'm pouring the Mediterranean Sea into the hole," the boy replied in all seriousness.

"My dear boy, what an impossible thing to try to do!" chided Augustine. "The sea is far too vast, and your hole is far too small."

Then as Augustine continued his walk, it dawned on him that in his efforts to explain the Trinity he was much like that boy: the subject was far too vast, and his mind was far too small!

But even though our minds are too small, our imaginations too inadequate, our words too insufficient, even if we are an oyster bed trying to dance *Swan Lake*, we keep trying to say something meaningful and faithful about God. Or at least, our experience of God, for while we cannot explain God, we feel compelled to describe how we have experienced the divine breaking into our humanity.

But we experience God in so many ways. "Some days God comes as a judge, walking through our lives wearing white gloves and exposing all the messes. Other days God comes as a shepherd, fending off our enemies and feeding us by hand. Some days

God comes as a whirlwind who blows all our certainties away. Other days God comes as a brooding hen who hides us in the shelter of her wings. Some days God comes as a dazzling monarch and other days as a silent servant.” (*Home by Another Way*, p. 153)

The problem with the doctrine of the Trinity may not be that it talks of God in three different ways, but that it talks of God in *only* three different ways, when our experience of God is so much more diverse and complex and amazing and joyful and awesome and intimate. We may try to cram God into some neat little doctrinal box, but God is constantly escaping and astounding us. Perhaps in the end, all we can do is open ourselves to the experience of God rather than insisting that we understand who God is. Perhaps, ultimately, we need to realize that at best, we can do no more just sniff around the edges of the mystery. And that ultimately, somehow, that is enough.

\*This sermon draws heavily on Barbara Brown Taylor’s sermon *Three Hands Clapping* in her collection of sermons *Home By Another Way*.