

Trinity

Genesis 1:1-2:4a

Canticle 13

2 Corinthians 13:11-13

Matthew 28:16-20

I want to let you in on a little inside clergy joke. Each year when Trinity Sunday rolls around, older, experienced priests try to find a young, wet-behind-the-ears priest, or better yet a seminarian, to preach about the Trinity. As a result, I've had the honor to have preached on this topic for the past four years, and I don't want to break my streak now, unless someone would like to step in.

The reason for this is that Trinitarian doctrine is admittedly, right off the bat, a difficult thing to understand, much less explain. Even the Bible isn't much help along these lines; there are only occasional and somewhat oblique references to the three parts, or manifestations, or modes, or aspects of God. In fact, even using the word "mode" as I just have was considered heretical in the early Church. The "official" way of referring to the Trinity is "One God exists in Three Persons and One Substance." The early Church councils spent a great deal of time trying to figure out how these three persons related to each other and if some were subordinated to the others. Even today, the nature of this relationship is one of the things that divides the Western Church from the Eastern Orthodox Church.

There are various symbols or analogies that preachers have used to represent the Trinity, with varying degrees of success. One is an egg, which is made up of three distinct, yet united parts; the yolk, the white and the shell. You must have all three together in order to have an egg, and the nature of each is reliant on the others. Another example is water, or more properly, H₂O. Water is one substance, yet it can exist in three different forms, namely a solid (ice), a liquid (water), or a gas (steam). In each case, we're talking about the same combination of atoms, but the outward appearance and internal properties are different.

Let me propose today another way of looking at the Trinity. It's not new, and it is biblically based... God is Love. How many times have we heard that one before? God is Love.

Love is one of those words that we use a lot but means different things in different situations. For example, the love we share between our siblings is different from that between spouses. Erotic love is different from God's self-giving *agape* love that we find in the Gospel of St. John and some of the Epistles. At the risk of complicating this notion of the Trinity even further, let's explore three facets or components of love that we find in the Bible representing the love that is God.

First, love is justice. We are not talking here about a neutral, dispassionate, or blind kind of justice. The core value of this type of love is compassion. Compassion takes sides, and the best example of this comes directly from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount; blessed are the meek, the persecuted, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Justice is inherently practiced in a social context. Justice not only sees individuals in their misery, but it also inquires after the causes of that misery. Those who do so are generally not popular among people wishing to maintain the status quo. In the Bible, prophets such as Amos were particularly harsh on the Jewish authorities. Closer to our own day, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was very clear that some laws are just and other laws are unjust, and in his understanding of justice, it is a person's moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. But here's the difference between Dr. King and anarchists;

one disobeys unjust laws in a loving and non-violent way. In his words, “Darkness can not drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

A second facet of love is truth. An early meaning of the Greek term for truth is “to tear away a veil.” It is much like the Claritan ad that appears on TV during hay fever season. The actor is in an environment that is fuzzy and filmy, then after taking the pill, everything clears up and the film is ripped off the screen. It is the light of truth that can expose lies.

I for one find this very difficult to put into practice, for I tend to avoid confrontation. If someone tells an off-color or ethnic joke, I will tend to brush it off, assuming that the person really didn’t mean it in the way that it came off, which in most cases was offensive. I don’t want to hurt the other person’s feelings by calling them on it, and I can rationalize it in the name of love. But in reality, this is not to protect them but to protect me. I protect my own feelings in this case, because I fear rejection. How often have families suffered the ravages wrought by the behavior of an alcoholic or drug-addicted member in the name of love? They explain away the behavior of their loved one or make excuses why he or she had to miss work yet again. This enabling behavior might seem to them to be a way of expressing love and compassion for their loved one, but that’s not the case. They are protecting themselves, not their loved ones. It is a far more difficult task to walk with someone through changes in their lives than to live in a status quo environment. The failure to communicate truth is not a manifestation of love.

Trustworthiness is a term that comes to mind when we enter into a discussion about truth. There’s a wonderful story in Exodus about two midwives, Shiprah and Puah. They were ordered by the Pharaoh to kill all the male babies of the Hebrew women. They feared God more than the Pharaoh, however, and let the male infants live. And they lied about it to the Pharaoh. They told pure, unadulterated lies, at least to our Western sensibilities. Yet in the classical Hebrew way of thinking, a lie is that which is powerless, empty, and vain, which this was not. This concept of truth calls for one to be trustworthy and to do what one is called to do.

Before I leave this truth aspect of love, there’s one additional thing that I’d like to mention, and this as well as much of what I’ve been saying comes from Christian Schwarz, the developer of the program called Natural Church Development that you may be familiar with. He says that Christians who are strong in truth usually do not feel threatened when others challenge their views. Those who are well-grounded enjoy questioning themselves, their views, their traditions, and their values in order to give more room to the light of truth in their lives. It is people who are weakly rooted in truth who find themselves on the defensive and regularly resort to fanaticism.

Earlier I mentioned that justice was an inherently social aspect of love. By contrast, the third facet of God’s love is inherently individual, and it is called grace. We hear a lot about grace in the Bible, and much of what we hear is contradictory to what has just been said. Why in the world would the father of the Prodigal Son welcome and throw a party for a son who long ago abandoned him and squandered his money. Was this just? The elder son certainly didn’t think so. But grace is not something that is earned; it is a free gift that only has to be accepted. Acceptance is the hallmark of grace. In Paul’s second letter to the disciples in Corinth, he says farewell to his brothers and sisters in Christ by urging them to stop squabbling with each other and live in harmony, then the God of love and peace will be with them. His final three-fold blessing is one that we use during Morning or Evening Prayer, and it reminds us of this gift of grace: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.” Grace does not justify sin, but it accepts the sinner. Acceptance is

more than mere tolerance, however; it is a full, loving embrace of that person, regardless of her or his condition.

In summary, then, we can look at an expanded definition of the Trinity. Justice is God's compassionate love in action. Truth is God's trustworthy love in action. Grace is God's accepting love in action. One God exists in three actions of love. We can represent God's love as brilliant white light, which we know from our school days is made up of all of the different colors of light. The light of God can be perceived by us humans in different ways, yet we all perceive the same God. Some Pentecostal traditions, for example, perceive God better through the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Others, such as Catholics and Evangelicals, relate more to Jesus the Redeemer. It is still the one God who is being perceived. Even though the sun and the moon both shine light, it is only the sun that produces the light. The moon only reflects the light of the sun. So it is with the light of God, which is reflected by us, the beloved children of God. As in an artist's color wheel, the closer we are to the center, the lighter and closer to white is the color. The further away from the center, the darker the colors. There are, however, still traces of God's light in the navy blues and forest greens and the burgundies.

Reflecting the Light is our job as Christians. We can see God in the faces of our loved ones as well as people who live on the street. We are called to respect the dignity of every human being, for we are all children of God. Darkness is the absence of light, and it is up to us to spread the reflected, loving light of the God who created us, the God who redeemed us, and the God who sustains us.

By Fr. Kirby M. Smith