

The Truth About God

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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Matthew 28:16-20 (NRSV)

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. [17] When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. [18] And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. [19] Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, [20] and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

MUSIC

I like to listen to music, and I insist on having the best stereo equipment available. I turn up the volume to realistic levels so that I can appreciate the dynamics. More than that, I do not want anyone talking to me while I am really listening to music.

Suffice it to say that I do most of my serious listening when I am at home alone. And if someone would intrude on one of my listening session they usually make some disparaging comment about the volume level, and I am forced to end that session!

Some of you won't understand my odd way of listening to music. But, some of you do understand. You know what it means to listen to complex music. When I listen to music I want to hear it all.

I want to hear the French horn, the trumpets, the bassoon, the oboe and the violins. And when I listen carefully to a familiar piece of classical music I can hear all of these instruments and more at the same time.

I guess that's why I'm so particular about musical equipment. Good music just isn't the same when you can't hear the rumble of the tympani or the deep bass notes. It may sound like Beethoven's fifth but if all the sounds aren't there it's just not as rich and meaningful an experience. The glory of the music is reduced.

GOD IS LIKE A SYMPHONY

In the same way, we Christians believe that God is like a symphony. There is one God, but the music of divinity is polyphonic. God reveals himself in three different ways at the same time. Just as I can hear the unique strains of the violin, cello and bass at the same time in order to make up the one piece of classical music, so God reveals himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit at the same time.

We might know something of God by just concentrating on just one person of the Trinity, and quite often in our talk about God we do just that. But, if we take that approach, our view of God would be distorted, and the glory of God would be diminished.

It would be like listening to concert music through miniature speakers. It might sound something like the original but the sound would be distorted. It would not be an accurate representation of what the composer meant the music to be.

In the same way, if we do not talk about God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we are not accurately representing the truth about God. The Triune God is not some invention of clever theologians. It is God's self-revelation.

THE BAPTISM FORMULA

In today's lesson from the gospel of Matthew Jesus commands his disciples to go into the whole world, make disciples and baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

This is not a full blown doctrine of the Trinity, but this passage is certainly one of those places in Scripture where we see quite clearly that a doctrine of the Trinity was an inevitable and necessary development in the church.

If Jesus told his disciples that new converts were to enter the church by being baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, this suggests to me that the Trinity is not some optional extra, but a foundational statement about what we as Christians have to say about God.

The most important question any religion has to answer is this: what is the truth about God? Who is the God that we worship? Christians answer by saying that the one God is revealed in three ways, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

HOMOGENIZING THE NAME OF GOD

In the name of tolerance some have tried to homogenize the name of God. Some have tried to change god into some kind of generic, vague and easily managed concept. In the interest of harmony you'll hear people say things like, "Religion doesn't make any difference. You may be Christian, Jewish, Muslim, or Hindu, but we all worship the same god."

I certainly understand the desire to be tolerant and respectful toward other religions. But, when we misrepresent other religions and our own faith in the name of tolerance, I think it is a sign of disrespect and misunderstanding toward their faith and our own. We must learn to clearly state the essence of our faith about God in the world marketplace of theological ideas.

In our lesson for today, Jesus tells his disciples (and he tells us) that when we go into the world, when we are in conversation with the world about the nature of God, we do not baptize just any

god or a vague generic concept of god. We baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

THE STANDARD OF ORTHODOXY

The doctrine of the Trinity is one of the most challenging, one of the most mysterious, and the most important doctrine of the church. The doctrine of the Trinity is our unique way of talking about God. The doctrine of the Trinity is the standard for Christian orthodoxy.

Almost every misunderstanding or distortion of the Christian faith in the history of the church has been due to a misunderstanding of or rejection of the Trinity. I think that's why Jesus had his disciples baptize in the name of the Trinity. The Trinity is the starting point for an understanding of God

But for many in the church the doctrine of the Trinity is a major stumbling block. Some just blindly accept the doctrine as something that I have to believe and others secretly worry if they are a heretic for the reservations about the doctrine.

DOUBT AND WORSHIP

By the way, if some of you have doubts or reservations about the Trinity you're in good company. Our Scripture for today tells us that when the risen Jesus appeared to his disciples on the mountain in Galilee, they worshipped him but some doubted him."

Doubt was always a part of the Christian community. But, instead of denying their doubts, these early Christians made it a part of their story. In every gospel there are stories about doubt that leads to a greater faith. In fact this verse could actually be translated, "they worshipped him but they doubted him."

According to the Bible, doubt and worship can co-exist. Doubts are not necessarily a reason to give up or quit worshipping. Doubts can lead us to a greater and more intelligent faith.

I like the way the New Interpreter's Bible puts it,

"Faith in the resurrection is a matter of worship, not of analysis and inference. Even so, it does not exclude doubt, but takes doubt into itself."

Christianity has always been a robust faith, a faith willing to meet every challenge and every doubt head on. Doubt is not the end of faith but its beginning. I like the way author Frederick Buechner puts it. He says that doubt is the "ants in the pants of faith." It keeps it awake and moving. If we don't have any doubts we're either asleep or kidding ourselves.

So today I'm going to take us where most preachers fear to tread. I'm going to go where people have honest doubts and concerns. I'm going to talk about this essential but often misunderstood doctrine, the doctrine of the Trinity.

A GOD WHO CANNOT BE DEFINED

First, let me say what we're not going to understand or learn. We are not going to completely understand God through this doctrine. We would have a better chance of drinking the ocean than understanding God completely. God is by definition above and beyond us.

In the Westminster Confession of Faith (one of the confessions of the Presbyterian Church) we read that God is "immutable, immense eternal, incomprehensible, almighty; most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute, working all things according to the counsel of his own immutable and most righteous will, for his own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek him ..."

That's a mouthful, and that's just a portion of what those early Reformers had to say. The Westminster Confession of Faith certainly does a good job of saying in many words what Jesus says today in a few words in our lesson for today. All authority in heaven and on earth resides with God.

A GOD REVEALED IN JESUS

But, that same authority also resides with Jesus. Jesus said in our lesson for today, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." Jesus is the human face of God.

God is too big for any of us to comprehend, but God in Christ chose to lower Himself to our level so that we could understand His grand nature on a human scale.

Paul in his letter to the Philippians suggests that though Jesus was of the same nature with God, he chose to lower himself to our level. He chose to empty himself, to become a human being and even be killed on a cross so that we might understand the sacrificial love of a God who is above and beyond us and yet at the same time cares deeply for us. (Philippians 2:5-11)

Before God chose to reveal Himself in Jesus our understanding of God was incomplete. We could marvel at the wonders of creation. We could think about the way God saved and guided his chosen people in the Promised Land. But, there was always more to come. There was always the promise of a Messiah and a new day in which all the people of the earth would come to know the one true God.

In order for God's people and the world to understand who God was in a deeper way, it was necessary for the story to be written in flesh and blood. In Jesus we have not only the truth about God but also the truth about humanity as well. In Jesus we see not only what it means to be truly God but also what it means to be truly human.

THE IMAGE OF THE INVISIBLE GOD

Jesus was always a mystery to the crowds and to his closest disciples. He did things that only God could do like raise the dead, heal the sick and even control the wind and the waves.

He said things that only God could say. He forgave sins. He said that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him, that he was called to preach good news to everyone, including those who had formerly been enemies.

It was at this point that his people often took offense at him. In his home some people remembered that Jesus was Mary and Joseph's boy. How could he speak in this way? How could he do these things?

Some wanted to kill him. Some were mystified by him. But, no one thought that he was God in the flesh. They all had doubts and questions about Jesus.

Several weeks ago we studied a passage from John's gospel in which even Jesus' closest disciples showed their doubts and lack of understanding. Philip told Jesus, "Show us the Father and we will be satisfied." In other words they wanted to see God.

And Jesus replied, "To see me is to see the Father." To know Jesus is to know the Father. To know Jesus is to know God. (See John 14:6-11) All authority in heaven and on earth is given to Jesus. He is (as Paul put it in his letter to the Colossians) the "image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation." (Colossians 1:15)

OBEDIENCE

If this is true, if Jesus is the image of the invisible God, then the life, death and resurrection of Jesus become the standard by which we judge everything. Discipleship is judged by obedience to the commands of Christ.

Jesus warned those first disciples that their job wasn't over when they baptized new converts in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. They had to teach them the implications of that baptism. With the grace of baptism comes great responsibility, the responsibility to follow in the footsteps of Christ, trusting in the power and promise of God's Spirit.

When we are baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, it is a symbol that our sins are being washed away. But, it is also a symbol that we have died to the old way of life and are reborn to live in a new way.

What is that new way? It is living in the way, the manner of Jesus Christ as we are empowered to do so by the Holy Spirit. It is living on the promise that "God is with us always even until the end of the age." (Matthew 16:20)

In some creeds we say that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. In other words the Spirit represents our connection with God. God is not just a God who created and saved people

long ago. God, through the Spirit maintains a personal connection with His people today. God in essence is a Trinity of love, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and we are reflections of that loving relationship.

Charles Wesley wrote in one of his hymns that we are “ordained to be Transcripts of the Trinity.” In other words through the power of the Spirit, God is writing a message to the world upon us. The world is learning about the God who reveals himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit through our relationships with each other.

GOD’S IMAGE

In the book of Genesis we read,

“Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’

[27] So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.” Genesis 1:26-27

Two things I want you to note about this passage. First, the Hebrew word for God (Elohim) is plural. You can see that in the translation of verse 26 when God said, “Let *us* make humankind in *our* image ...”

And second human beings are made in the image of God ... male and female he created them. I think this means that the image of God in us is the fact that we are made to be in relationship. It’s more than just the husband/wife relationship although it begins there. The Image of God stresses that all of life is relational in nature. All of life is a reflection of God. Paul put it well in his letter to the Corinthians when he described the church. He said, “You are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” (1 Corinthians 12:27)

The Spirit of God in Christ transforms our relationships into (as Wesley put it) Transcripts of the Trinity. To put it another way, the Trinity is not something that we figure out so much as something that we live out. The Triune God enables us to be who we are called to be, people created in the image of God.

Paul put it beautifully in his letter to the Romans when he wrote, “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.” (Romans 8:11)

Paul is not just talking about life eternal but also life here and now. We are empowered by the Spirit of God to live as disciples of Jesus today.

The Bible tells us that God is love. (1 John 4:7-21) And we are to love one another because he first loved us. To put it another way, to know God is to love others. In fact the Bible teaches us

that this is the only way that we can see God. We can see God only through loving, Christ like relationships with others.

PRESENT FROM CRADLE TO GRAVE

When we baptize a child, we ask the parent, “What is the child’s name?”

We do that not because we have forgotten but because there is a connection between their name and their baptism. We are named by our baptism into the Christian faith. We are defined as children of the covenant, baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Our name is merged with God’s name.

We don’t understand what that means as an infant. In fact we don’t understand anything as an infant. But, there are people present at our baptism, parents and grandparents and church members. And these people promise to pray for us, to teach us the faith and care for us as we grow in grace.

From the very beginning our connection with God is also a connection with God’s community. From the very beginning our connection to God is a family affair. We meet this God through relationships.

God reveals himself to us through the loving and caring actions of specific people. They teach us what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. They teach us about an all powerful Father who created heaven and earth.

And through their ministry we learn that the Spirit of the living God falls fresh on each new generation.

David Livingstone, when asked what had sustained him in all the perils of his pilgrimage in Africa answered by quoting this verse, “I am with you always until the end of the age.”

It is said that when his wife died in Africa, he helped prepare her body for burial, helped make the coffin, helped lower it into the grave, and helped cover it with earth. Then he opened his New Testament, read this text and said to his African associates, “Jesus Christ is too much of a Gentleman not to keep his word; let us get on with the task.”

This is the truth that is with us at the beginning of our journey and at the end ... God is with us always

Each new generation must learn this loving truth. Each new generation must learn that this is the promise of our baptism. God is with us always. He has revealed Himself to as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

In his name we make disciples.

Amen.

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