

## Trinity

June 10, 2009

*Mt. Olive Manor – Flanders, NJ*

---

**Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31**

John 3:1-17

---

Last Sunday was Trinity Sunday in our church year, and so I'm going to bring that same theme forward to today. As any of you who've ever tried to explain the Trinity know, there is almost no way to explain the Trinity without straying into heresy. Today I'm not going to try to explain the Trinity. What I will talk about is *how* God has revealed Himself to us, and why.

+ + +

As I prepared for today's message to you, my thoughts kept wandering back to a young man I met during my senior year in college. I'll call this young man "John."

At that time I was serving an internship as a campus chaplain. I served as a member of the Campus Ministry Association representing Protestant denominations. I served alongside representatives of a number of different faiths – not only Roman Catholic and Orthodox, but also Jewish, Unitarian, Buddhist, and Muslim.

In my capacity as a campus chaplain, I was invited to attend a program hosted by the Muslim Student Association, titled, “What the Koran says about Jesus.” The Koran is the holy book of Islam. This program was used as an opportunity to proselytize, and tell people of non-Muslim faiths just how we had erred.

One of the speakers at this forum was the young man I spoke of earlier, John. John was a Caucasian American, probably around 22 years of age. Shortly after he began speaking, I realized that what he was really doing was offering his testimony for Islam, and how he came to realize that the Baptist faith in which he was raised was wrong.

The thing that has stuck in my mind about his talk was that John said the thing that he could never understand about Christianity was the Trinity. He said this was what eventually drove him to Islam.

John said: How can three gods be one? It just doesn't add up. He said that even in elementary school he learned that one plus one plus one equals three, and NEVER one. The Trinity is, he said, in fact not one god, but three... and that makes Christians polytheists – worshippers of multiple gods, not the one true God of the Old Testament and the Koran.

Now, I suppose that I might have felt indignant that, in front of this group of nearly 500 students, this man had just declared everything I believe to be false. But instead, I felt sad. I felt sad that this young man had turned his back on the faith his parents had tried to pass on to him, out of their love for him. I felt sad that whatever Christian educators he'd had in his young life never managed to do a better job of explaining that, where God is concerned, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not three separate gods, but One. One plus one plus one doesn't have to equal three – and, in fact, one plus one plus one does indeed equal One, when it's God we're talking about.

God is not a mathematical entity. God is a divine reality. As one of the early Church fathers said, “When we talk about the Trinity, we must forget how to count.”

+ + +

I wish that I knew when I met John what I know now. I'd have probably told him about the philosophy of Anselm of Canterbury. That might have appealed to John's young, radical college mind.

Anselm lived in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. He was a medieval Scholastic philosopher. And, he was the first person to attempt to set out a logical argument for the existence of God.

Anselm's argument grew out of his meditations on the first verse of Psalm 14, which says, "Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no god.'" He then set out an eight-point argument that began, "God is defined as the being in which none greater is possible." Anselm concluded by saying, "God is a being in which a greater is *im*possible. Therefore, God exists in reality as well as the mind."

So what Anselm is saying is that anything we can think of as being God is, indeed, NOT God. If we could imagine God, within the limits of the human mind, whatever we could imagine would not be God. God is beyond human imagining. God cannot be defined by humanity, because we are too limited to understand God's true nature. I think if Anselm were to paraphrase Psalm 14 – "Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no god'" – Anselm would instead say, "Fools say in their hearts, 'I *understand* God.'"

So, no, in this life we will never fully understand the nature of God. Even the Catechism of the Roman Catholic church says, "Concerning God, we cannot grasp what He is, but only what He is not, and how other beings stand in relation to Him."

+ + +

But there are some people, like John, that young Islamic convert I met, who persist in trying to put God into a box built by humans. They believe that God can be fully understood. They believe that God can only exist in terms defined by humans. *They deny God the capacity to be God.*

I think even the early Jews realized that God defies human definition. In today's reading from Proverbs, we hear that the early Jews realized their God had been revealed to them as more than God the Creator, the God who had been intimately involved in leading them through history.

The early Jews had a revelation of God as *a call to all people*. This experience of God they called Wisdom, with a capital "W." While they may not have been precisely able to put in human terms this revelation of God, they had experienced Wisdom in their lives as a call to live a faithful life.

As the poet in today's first reading tells us, the early Jews also realized that this experience of God, "Wisdom," was a part of God even before creation. Wisdom was with God at the beginning of creation. Wisdom rejoiced in creation, and continues to delight in God's creation of humanity.

So, to those who might say that the Old Testament doesn't contain Gospel, I would emphatically say, "No!" Today's reading from Proverbs is proof positive that the Old Testament does contain Gospel. In this person of Wisdom, we hear of a God who wants to be in relationship with us, through the person of Wisdom. Wisdom goes to the very heart of the city and calls to *all* people. Wisdom wants to give us a gift; Wisdom wants us to be restored into a proper relationship with God.

+ + +

Now, those of us who call ourselves Christian – those who worship in the name of the Triune God – know God's *complete* revelation in history as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God the Father, as creator of the universe. God the Son, who makes it possible to overcome the stain of Original Sin. And God the Holy Spirit, who calls and sustains us in the faith.

This is all the truth we need for salvation. It's not necessary for us to understand the nature of God, nor is it possible, because God is God and we are not.

In this life, we will not have all understanding. But we do have knowledge of God's love for us. That is all the understanding required.

And as God has reached out to us in love, and we have experienced God's love for us, we are to reach out to others in love. This brings me back to John, whom I was talking about earlier. You see, I ran into John several months after that first meeting, at a department store.

You could tell there was that moment of feeling ill at ease when we first saw each other. Should we talk? I knew that within his religious beliefs, it would be improper for John to speak to me, a female who is not a relative. But I also knew he was an American man who was *not* raised as a Muslim. So I approached him. I'm just a troublemaker that way. *<pause>* We had a nice little conversation, talking about his schooling and what he planned to do after that. The conversation ended with me wishing him well.

John must have left that conversation scratching his head. At least, I hope he did. He seemed genuinely puzzled that I would speak to him. And I hope that's a question that stayed on his heart for a long time. Because even though we each considered the other's religious beliefs false, I chose to treat John as a fellow child of God. God loves him every bit as much as He loves me. And I know that God is waiting with eagerness to welcome John back into the fold. I'm hoping that by treating him with the love that God has for me, I was able to give John a nudge back toward our Triune God.

God loves us enough to come to Earth in the person of Jesus Christ. God shows us the ultimate act of love. God allowed the sacrifice of His own Son in order that we might all be called sons and daughters of God. As our Gospel writer said, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” God continues to call us to faith in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

[1,620 words]