

**BEING CHRISTIAN AMONG MANY FAITHS:  
AN OLD DOCTRINE FOR A NEW IDEA**

Matthew 28:16-20

*A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on May 18, 20008, Trinity Sunday, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

**Focus Text**

*Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'*

One recent morning, I was holed up in my office working on a sermon. I had told our office staff not to disturb me unless it was a pastoral emergency. I had punched my favorite button on our new phone system – “Do Not Disturb” – which renders me virtually unreachable to phone and intercom calls.

A couple of hours into the morning, one of our office staff, Tara Cain, knocked on my door. “There is a woman from Iraq praying in our chapel,” she said. “She has lost her father. I think she really needs to see a pastor.”

I followed Tara down to the chapel and found there a woman, about forty, on her knees in the chancel. I sat down on the floor beside her. She told me her name; and she identified herself as either Shiite or Sunni, which I cannot now remember. She told me her father was a professor and diplomat in Iraq. For many years he had lived in fear for his life and had insisted that she and her husband come to America which they did, settling in this neighborhood. She said:

Two days ago, my father was kidnapped from his bedroom in the middle of the night. My mother and brother waited for several days. We all knew what had happened. The police called my brother this morning to identify a body found in the street. It was my father. He had been executed.

Tara had done a great job consoling this woman. There wasn't much more for me to do or to say. I simply sat on the floor with her for a while, let her cry and talk. She said that she was Muslim but had come to our church because she had walked by it many times and it seemed like a place she could find God.

I offered to pray with her and she accepted. I prayed the way I usually pray when someone has died. I gave thanks for her father and the way God had made the world a richer place because of his presence in it. I asked God to comfort her, her mother, and her brother. And in this instance, I prayed that such wartime deaths might be averted in the future. I then closed the prayer in my normal way: “In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.”

Immediately I caught myself. “I'm sorry,” I said. “I didn't mean to use the name of Christ.”

“It's okay,” she said. “I believe that God loves us all.”

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I believe the woman's presence in our chapel and her words speak to us

- On Trinity Sunday
- On the last Sunday of a sermon series “Being Christian Among Many Faiths”
- And on a Sunday in which we are envisioning our future as a congregation.

## I.

Over thirty years ago, German theologian Eberhard Jungel coined a phrase to describe the Trinity, a doctrine deeply embedded in our Christian faith yet never explicitly explained in the Bible. According to Jungel, in depicting God as “Father, Son, and Spirit,” the doctrine of the Trinity presents God as “a being structured as a relationship.”<sup>1</sup>

God is a “being” – to be sure – we believe that; but God is also a relationship – a relationship among Father, Son, and Spirit.

- Father relates to Son and Son relates Father
- Spirit relates to Son and Son relates to Spirit
- Father relates to Spirit and Spirit relates to Father

“A being structured as a relationship.”

Presbyterian minister and author Michael Lindvall writes:

The God we meet in the Bible is God who passionately and tirelessly *longs* for humanity. This God actually *pursues* relationship...This is a God whose every act is...a reaching out of the Divine Being toward humanity in love. ...

Not only does this God love [Lindvall continues], but...this God actually *is* love...the *Mysterium Tremendum* [Tremendous Mystery] is a God who *is* love, a God who *is* relationship, a God who *is* communion...<sup>2</sup>

In addition to this internal relationship within the Trinity, a relationship of love, the Trinity demonstrates the multiple ways God relates to us.

- We know God as Creator, and we attribute creation to “*God* the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth”; but we also believe that *Christ* is present at creation as Word.
- We know God as Redeemer, but we also believe that when Christ was born, it was *God* who became flesh and dwelt among us, “Immanuel,” “God-With-Us.”
- We know God as Sustainer, but believe that when God is present, sustaining us, it is as Spirit, Holy Spirit.<sup>3</sup>

“A being structured as a relationship,” a relationship that is love, and a relationship that reaches out and draws *us* into its own dynamics, its own being, its own love. Drawn into the being of God, we are drawn into God’s love.

“It’s okay,” the Iraqi woman said. “I believe God loves us all,” draws us all in.

## II.

When at the Great Commission the *risen* Christ sends his disciples out, he does so in the name of the Trinity, in the name of this “being structured as a relationship.”

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me [he says]; 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; teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you, and lo I am with you always, even to the close of the age.

Several aspects of this commission can impact our church as we look at our immediate and long-term future.

### (a)

First, it is in Galilee that the risen Christ commissions his disciples. Galilee is a city in the Roman Empire, at its time one of the most powerful political entities in the known world.

- Christ’s commission begins with one imperative verb: “Go.” Go from this place. Go from this mountain. Go from this fellowship among yourselves. Go into the city. Go into the region. Go into the nation. Go into the world. “Go.”

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<sup>1</sup> I believe Jungel’s best known book on this topic is *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (Edinburgh: Scottish Press, 1976). I have drawn this phrase from lectures given by Cynthia M. Campbell at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary in early 2007, which were then published as *A Multitude of Blessings: A Christian Approach to Religious Diversity* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Michael L. Lindvall, Paper on Matthew 28:16-20, presented at *The Moveable Feast Preaching Seminar*, January 2008, page 10.

<sup>3</sup> See Campbell, pages 72-79.

- Likewise, when Christ commissions us, Westminster Presbyterian Church, he commissions us to live and to work in one of the most powerful cities in one of the most powerful nations in history. “Go.”

As the disciples accepted this commission, Christ knew that they were subject to the multiple and unrelenting demands of the Roman Empire for cultural, vocational, and religious loyalty. Likewise, when Christ commissions us, he is aware that, as highly educated and prosperous people, we live amidst overwhelming and competing demands for loyalty that surround us and call our name, offering their blessings and their curses, often at one and the same time, sometimes in disguise:

- Demands that lead 100% success this year to be 105% next year and 110% the year after
- Demands for being “first class” in everything, from the kitchens and bathrooms we put in our homes, to the wines we order at restaurants, to the streams of information we cannot stop consuming as if they were Lay’s Potato Chips – “betcha can’t just watch one podcast.”

Whether we are

- students on a lacrosse team
- teachers in a diverse public school
- lobbyists for a cause noble or narrow
- parents of one we have brought into this world or adopted into our home
- or a highly-achieving person, in the waning years of life, facing the extended length but diminished quality of his life and that of his wife’s, tragically choosing, as happened at Ingleside this week, murder and suicide over patience and perseverance –

we are subject to overwhelming demands and unlimited opportunities, often at the same time, in the same place: Northern Virginia, America, 2008.

(b)

Second, to his disciples facing the demands of Rome, the risen Christ said: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to *me*.”

He voices the same words to us: “All authority...has been given ... –

- not to the sports you play
- not to the admissions processes through which a college chooses you
- not to the political party for which you work nor the law firm through whose halls you stately stride.

Rather, he says: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to *me*.”

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In Hebrew, the word for “wisdom” is *hokmah*. One of its original meanings is “steering a ship.”<sup>4</sup>

My friends, if we do nothing else in our congregation but equip all who come through our doors for steering the ship between the life offered by Jesus Christ and the life demanded by our culture, we will be doing well.

If we help one another acquire the spiritual and practical wisdom to know

- when being a disciple of Christ means stepping aside from something in culture
- when it means opposing something in culture
- when it means withdrawing from something in culture
- when it means embracing something in culture

we will be doing tremendous ministry.

(c)

Third, Jesus tells his disciples to “make disciples of all nations” [read “all people”] by “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”

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<sup>4</sup> R. B. Y. Scott *The Way of Wisdom* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, Inc., 1971), 7.

And what has he commanded? “To love God with heart and soul and mind” and “to love neighbor as self.”<sup>5</sup>  
Lindvall writes:

If the deepest truth about God is that God is love... relationship, communion...[then] ...everything we do,  
*everything...is...to reflect the perfect communion of love that is the very nature of God.*<sup>6</sup>

This “being structured as a relationship” calls us to teach the love he is.

### III.

Just as God is a “being structured as a relationship,” we are a church structured as a relationship.

- Just as the relationship *within* God is that of Father, Son, and Spirit; the relationship within our church is that of education, fellowship, and mission.
- Conversely, just as we enter faith in God through relating initially to Creator, Redeemer, or Sustainer, we initially seek to serve at Westminster through education, fellowship, or mission.

The key to faith and to life at Westminster is to expand from the point of entry to the fullness of relationship.

- If we come to know God primarily through Spirit, the challenge is to expand our knowledge of Spirit to include Son and Father, to move from knowing God as Sustainer to knowing God as Redeemer and as Creator.
- Likewise, if we primarily serve at Westminster through education, our challenge is to expand our faith and commitment to include mission and fellowship.

Our faith is richer when we know God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer; our discipleship is richer when we know the church through mission, fellowship, and education.

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Being drawn into Trinity, we enter a relationship of love – love among God as Father, Son, and Spirit; love of neighbor as self.

Being drawn into Westminster, we express our love of God at center of who we are – every Sunday – through worship; and we express our love of neighbor when we leave worship to serve through mission, fellowship, and education.

Loving God with heart and soul and mind, loving neighbor as self, this is central to what it means to be centered in worship, to “worship well.”

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“It’s okay,” the woman said. “I believe God loves everyone.”

In her grief,  
She was onto something:  
A being structured as a relationship,  
A relationship of love,  
A love drawing everyone in.

Perhaps her voice was the voice of Christ,  
Commissioning us to steer our ship  
Through the waters of culture,  
To love God and love neighbor,  
To worship well.

Perhaps through her  
Christ is telling us:  
“Go...”

Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 22:34-40/

<sup>6</sup> Lindvall, 10.