

Trinity Sunday  
Jan Walker  
Christ Church Episcopal  
Matthew 28: 16-20  
(Saturday evening service)  
June 18, 2011

Tomorrow is Trinity Sunday, one of the major Feast Days in the calendar of the church year. so I guess this evening will be Trinity Saturday. And it's the only day all year where the sermon is pretty much supposed to be about the whole concept of the Trinity - how we look at God, how we explain God, and how we experience God in three persons...in three aspects of who God is.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit...

And it can come across as a kind of seminary lecture sermon if we're not careful because it's about trying to explain a doctrine instead of talking about Jesus and all the things that Jesus did, and all the ways that Jesus was with people, and all the ways that Jesus is with us - now.

And it can be enough of a challenge that it's kind of a joke among clergy that you had better invite your bishop to preach on Trinity Sunday, because you'd just as soon preach about something else - something that's not a doctrine of the church.

And so tomorrow, at the 10:45 service, the Presiding Bishop of the whole Episcopal Church is coming here -

Katherine Jefferts Schori - and she will be the preacher - so how could we get better than that! So I am kind of off the hook here, because I've preached more sermons than I can remember about the Trinity over the years, but this one will be different.

So...once upon a time, in a church where I served, a man called and he asked if we could have some time to talk. And I was really glad to hear from him because his wife had told me a few months before, that he wanted to talk, but that it would be hard for him to call. They hadn't been in the congregation very long - they'd moved from another state, and she came every Sunday, but he didn't always come.

On the day he came to my office he just began to make general conversation and I could tell that he was kind of uncomfortable, and I didn't want to push him, but I finally said, "Is there anything you want to talk about?"

And he said that there was, but that it was going to be hard, but his wife had told him that he really needed to do it since this was their church now, and it probably would be for a long time.

He told me that he hadn't been raised in any church but that after his children were born, he started going to the Episcopal Church with his wife and he found that he had been searching for a faith, and he was growing in a faith that he was just beginning to find.

The rector of their church was a very learned man who gave thought provoking sermons, and it was clear that he knew a lot about the bible and he had a lot of answers, and so one day the man made an appointment to go and see him.

He did have some questions about faith, but mainly, he wanted to share some of his own thoughts and insights that he had come to on his faith journey. And he went in trusting that he would be listened to and they would talk together, and that he would tell the rector what was opening some doors for him in his spiritual life. How God was opening some doors.....

The conversation was going well, and then the man took a risk and he began to tell the rector some very deep thoughts about what the whole concept of the Trinity meant to him. He said that he didn't really understand it, but he felt it. And then he shared his version of how the Trinity made sense to him.

And then all the energy in the room began to change, and the rector leaned forward in his chair and glared at him, and very slowly and angrily he said, "That is blasphemy. What you've just said is heresy!"

And he proceeded to tell him why he was wrong and he went on and on, in a long theological monologue where he told the man that there was only one way to look at God in Trinity and this was it. And the man felt incredible shame and he felt like a child being scolded, and he told me that

he remembered saying, as he was walking out of the room, “Well, it’s clear that I shouldn’t even be going to church.” And he didn’t, after that... for a very long time.

The man tried to laugh a little, after he told me what had happened so long ago, but I could see that it was still a tender and vulnerable place for him, and I said, “I am so sorry that happened to you, and thank you for letting me know. Is there anything we want to do with that...here?”

And he didn’t say anything right away, and then he laughed and he said, “Well, I don’t want you to tell me anything about the Trinity...!” And we both laughed and I said, “I wouldn’t touch that!” And we spent the rest of the time talking about his life, which had been hard, and his spiritual journey, and where he found himself now in his faith.

And it was clear to me that the man had incredible wisdom about life and death and pain and joy and gratitude and grace, and whatever the whole concept of God in Trinity was for him. He was living his life out of his relationship, and out of his experience with his Triune God. And because of all of that, he had been able to truly, in his heart, forgive that rector who had hurt him and caused him to have such shame that day.

Well, the thing is that the Trinity is a mystery. It’s been spelled out very specifically in our creeds - the Athanasian Creed - the Nicene Creed and the Apostle’s Creed, but even with all the detailed explanations, it’s still a mystery -

and who can really explain a mystery, no matter how carefully we choose our words.

I know that in many churches this weekend there will be some really thoughtful sermons about the Trinity, and some will very specifically try to explain it, and some will give various helpful reflections that talk about the core of the Holy Trinity in terms of an ongoing flow of relationship and communion and mutuality in the divine love among Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

and they might say that the Trinity says that at the heart of the universe is a dynamic on going flow of love among God who is creator and God who comes in the flesh - and God who moves in our hearts and in the world - but all one God in an endless giving and receiving of love. They might say that -the Presiding Bishop might say that tomorrow, and I'm going to come back and hear what she says.... and I hope many of you will too....

I suspect that even though we're living with a Trinity mystery, most of us have a pretty good sense of God who comes to us in three ways. God who created us and everything in this world, and Jesus who walks with us as our friend and our brother our companion and our Savior - and who knows the joy and pain of being human, and as the Holy Spirit, who somehow keeps helping us to know all that God has done for us and will do for us and does for us now...and helps us to know Jesus.

The Trinity is about how we experience God - and

whatever the man said, when he came to see the rector of his church, what he really wanted to do was to tell him what it was like for him to be in the presence of God in his own life - what it reminded him of, and that he could relate to God in so many ways. And he had tried to explain that, and name some of the ways. But they didn't come out in the formula that the church introduced back in the 11th century.

And maybe he used different symbols that he could relate to, but the rector couldn't because he was so focused on being right - right in all the ways that the words of all the creeds said, and maybe in his heart, he even meant well that day, because he wanted the man to get it right too. But he forgot about doing that with love and care....

Maybe the real secret of living well is not trying to answer all the questions in life, but just being with them ...just living with the questions in the best way we can and living with faith, and living with each other in love and care.

And if the rector had really been wise that day when the man came to see him, he would have listened to him with his heart and he would have begun to know that he wasn't coming look for answers. If he had been, he would have asked, He was coming to tell his story - the story of his faith journey and how he had come there and where he was now.

Everybody has a story and everybody is a story - we are our stories - and telling our story is the way wisdom gets

passed along. Not necessarily knowledge, but wisdom. And telling our story to someone who listens - can become holy time...

Well, I wanted to tell you a Trinity story And I can tell you how I experience God in Trinity - and it's a total experience of love - and being loved by God in all the ways that God does that and shows me that. And maybe some day some of you will tell me how you experience God in your own way too, because I really would love to know that....

But here's the end of this Trinity story. The man who came to see me died three years later... on, believe it or not, Trinity Sunday. He had been in very much pain for much too long from a terminal illness, and there were those of us whose main prayer had finally been for his release from suffering. And it finally came early on that Sunday morning.

And when the congregation was told of his death, we had prayers for him there in the service and we gave thanks for his life and ministry among us. He had become a beloved member of our congregation.

As people were leaving after worship, a woman stopped at the door and said to me - You know, somehow this seems like just the right day that that good man went to be with the Lord...and I said that I thought so too...

And I think that only his wife and I knew and believed

that there was another mystery there on that Trinity Sunday....because it really was just the right day.