

Sermon for Trinity Sunday 2010

It has been said that “Trinity Sunday,” in an odd way, keeps the doctrine of God’s tri-unity remote, exotic, and “special”—something to be observed this one day of the year and expounded upon with clunky analogies. For this reason, a novel like *The Shack* which portrays the image of the Father as a rather wise black mother most at home in the kitchen, the son as a hip, laid back carpenter dude, and the Holy Spirit as an ephemeral, sparkly, Asian woman seems to gel with the spiritual hunger of millions of American readers.

Debra Dean Murphy in her commentary on the theology of *The Shack* reminds us that the Trinity is not three persons, a pitfall of a theologian reading the novel literally fearing that the public will as well. But just as the book or movie versions of Dan Brown novels, *The De Vinci Code* and *Angels and Demons*, are not meant to reflect with any accuracy the history of the Church, so the author of *The Shack* had no intentions of writing a treatise on Trinitarian theology.

Finally it falls to us - to preachers and communities of believers - to allow ourselves to play with new ideas just as the author of *The Shack* explores the depths of his own faith with words, images and actions that speak to us of reality of the tri-unity of God. We need to know that it is OK to dive into the mystery of the Trinity and be encountered by it in ways that capture our imagination and speak to our own experiences and longings.

When Jesus asks his disciples about who he is, one preacher has a bit of fun as he puts Peter’s answer in theological language, and Jesus reply, perhaps like your response.

*Jesus asked his disciples,
Who do men say that I am? And his disciples
answered and said, "Some say you are John the
Baptist returned from the dead; others say Elias,
or other of the old prophets." And Jesus
answered and said, "But who do you say that I*

am?" Peter answered and said, "You are the Logos, existing in the Father as His rationality and then, by an act of His will, being generated, in consideration of the various functions by which God is related to his creation, but only on the fact that Scripture speaks of a Father, and a Son, and a Holy Spirit, each member of the Trinity being coequal with every other member, and each acting inseparably with and interpenetrating every other member, with only an economic subordination within God, but causing no division which would make the substance no longer simple." And Jesus answering, said, "What?"

In the Historical Documents in the back of the Book of Common Prayer, you will find the Creed of Athanasius, the Church's ancient explanation of the Trinity and, as I have been told, read in many Lutheran Churches on this day to get the message to the faithful. If one is steeped in Greek philosophical terms and the heresies of the fourth and fifth centuries, this Creed would perhaps have more meaning than it holds for us today. As with the ancient Nicene Creed, forced to be formulated by the bishops by order of the Emperor Constantine, all statements about God and the Trinity are merely metaphors to help us understand what still remains a mystery to us and often confusion to others.

President Obama addressing a Muslim audience in Egypt last year appealed to mutual understanding of the commandment to love God and our neighbors as ourselves, not only as the summary of Judaic Law but of the Islamic Law as well. He recalled our common roots as we all are children of Abraham. Indeed with a Muslim father and a Christian mother, two of the three faiths come together in him in a way experienced by no other President in our history.

Yet as a visit to Buchenwald or Auschwitz reminds us, the Holocaust and the Crusades before them grew out of our suspicion and fear of the other. If we go back in our Christian history, both the roots of the Holocaust and the state of Christian/Muslim relations can be seen in the history of Crusades and the Inquisition.

An Episcopal priest was recently deposed because she was also a practicing Muslim. The Bishop Elect of Northern Michigan was strongly criticized for being a Christian who has been trained in and practices Buddhist meditation. He failed to receive the consents necessary to become a bishop.

Phyllis Tickle, in her groundbreaking book, *The Great Emergence*, describes the changes that the Church faces in our time as comparable to those of the Reformation. She states that the theology that emerges will be in part based on society's reconfigured understanding of the self, the soul, and the humanness of being created in the image of God. "It will impact everything from medical policy to moral theory as well as evangelism and religious formation....If...the Great Emergence really does what most observers think it will, it will rewrite Christian theology—and thereby North American culture—into something far more Jewish, more paradoxical, more narrative, and more mystical.