



The Whole Thing Incomprehensible

Sermon preached by the Reverend Carol Cole Flanagan on Trinity Sunday, May 18, 2008 at Christ Church, Detroit. RCL Readings: Genesis 1:1 – 2:4a; Psalm 8; 2 Corinthians 13: 11-13; Matthew 28: 16-20.

I think the task of the preacher today is to bring together the celebration of the Trinity with the commemoration of Justice Thurgood Marshall and the upcoming consecration of the Chapel of Sts. Elizabeth and Eunice in the south transept – something of a challenge.

As some of you know I am a fan of mystery novels. What captivates me is that at the conclusion of the tale the truth has been revealed and justice done. In the western world of the 21st century, truth and justice are often much more elusive than they are in novels. Among my favorite authors is Dorothy Sayers, a British author whose protagonist is Lord Peter Wimsey.

In *How I Came to Invent the Character of Lord Peter Wimsey*, Sayers says:

“Lord Peter's large income ... I deliberately gave him ... After all it cost me nothing and at the time I was particularly hard up and it gave me pleasure to spend his fortune for him. When I was dissatisfied with my single unfurnished room I took a luxurious flat for him in Piccadilly. When my cheap rug got a hole in it, I ordered him an Aubusson carpet. When I had no money to pay my bus fare I presented him with a Daimler double-six, upholstered in a style of sober magnificence, and when I felt dull I let him drive it. I can heartily recommend this inexpensive way of furnishing to all who are discontented with their incomes. It relieves the mind and does no harm to anybody.”

(Quoted by Barbara Reynolds in *Dorothy L. Sayers: Her Life and Soul* with the parenthetical "not entirely accurate, but why should it be?" page 230.)

It is a good thing she had a sense of humor because Dorothy Sayers was indeed hard up as she puts it. It was the mysteries that paid the rent. But they were not her vocation. She was by calling and training a theologian and Dante scholar.

She was studying the Trinity as described in the Creed of Saint Athanasius, which you will find on p. 864 of the Book of Common Prayer. There is a reason we do not recite it on Sundays. Here's just a portion:

... And the Catholic Faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance.

For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost.

But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one, the Glory equal, the Majesty co-eternal. Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Ghost.

The Father uncreate, the Son uncreate, and the Holy Ghost uncreate.

The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible.

The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Ghost eternal.

And yet they are not three eternals, but one eternal.

As also there are not three incomprehensibles, nor three uncreated, but one uncreated, and one incomprehensible.

Have your eyes glazed over yet? It prompted Sayers to write “The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, the whole thing incomprehensible.” (Creed and Chaos)

She is also known to have said, "It takes a mighty big stigma to beat a dogma." She could have been talking about Trinity Sunday, the only time in the entire liturgical year that we celebrate a doctrine.

We do like things in threes however. After all, I began this sermon a moment ago by identifying the three strands I'm going to pursue.

Good Morning America Weekend invites viewers to send in a video that summarizes the week in three words. Some are clever, some touching and some sad. There is an elderly woman in cap and gown with the three words “Got my GED,” an engagement ring with the words “Yes or no?” and an older man with a card reading “Found my mama” followed by a second that read “After 58 years.” Some are amusing, “Wisconsin Softball Season” with a ball player suited up in the snow, or “Our therapy session” when the camera zooms out to show a young couple taking off on a motorcycle. Sad was the woman in front of a suburban house whose three words read “Lost our home” and whose husband’s read “Due to greed,” followed soon after by another video and the words “Insurance just cancelled.” Last weekend there were some for Mother’s Day with Mom in mind however. A young boy tumbles out of a minivan with a card reading “Drives me everywhere,” and then there were three words under a Band-Aid, “Makes it better,” and then “You’re the best.” All of these concern people in relationship.

The Trinity is about God in relationship. When we speak of one God in three persons it helps to have at hand an earlier understanding of the word “persons.” *Person* came from the Latin word *persona* which referred to a mask worn by an actor. One God in three persons might be like saying one actor in three roles or three characters. What the Trinity conveys is that God’s very being is essentially social. God is, within God’s-self,

which is to say within the Godhead, a being that gives and receives and loves and is loved. God is by definition a God-in-relationship.

Now to Justice Marshall: Today we participate in the commemoration of Thurgood Marshall, the first African-American justice of the Supreme Court, a vestry member and a deputy to General Convention among other things. It is generally observed on or near the 17th of May which is the anniversary of the Brown v. Board of Education landmark school desegregation decision. There has been an initiative to have Marshall added to the church calendar.

According to guidelines, “The Church is ‘the communion of Saints,’ that is, a people made holy through their mutual participation in the mystery of Christ. This communion exists through history, exists now, and endures beyond “the grave and gate of death” into heaven. For “God is not a God of the dead but of the living,” and those still on their earthly pilgrimage continue to enjoy communion “with those whose work is done.”

“The pilgrim Church rejoices to recognize and commemorate those faithful departed who were extraordinary or even heroic servants of God and God’s people after the example of Jesus Christ. By this recognition and commemoration, their service endures in the Spirit, as their examples and fellowship continue to nurture the pilgrim Church on its way to God.”

In our tradition the title *saint* is restricted to figures from scripture; St. Luke the Physician and St. Mary Magdalene to name two. Other worthies included in the calendar of Lesser Feasts & Fasts include those from the first centuries onward. However, each province of the Anglican Communion has a calendar of commemorations of people whose life and witness have inspired or served as an example to others in their own part of the world from Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch in Syria, who was martyred in 115 C.E. to Jonathan Myrick Daniels, a seminarian and witness for civil rights who was shot in Alabama in 1965 protecting a sixteen year old girl named Ruby Sales who has since gone into the ministry herself and came to testify at Convention in 1991 for his place in the church calendar. There was a time when the people commemorated in the calendar of the Episcopal Church in the U.S. were mostly male, mostly white and mostly ordained. That has been changing little by little. Within the past several decades we have added some interesting people to the calendar.

David Pendleton Oakerhater was a distinguished Cheyenne warrior who was taken prisoner by the U.S. Army in 1875 and charged with inciting rebellion, but who came under the influence of an Army captain from whom he learned English and the Christian faith. With the sponsorship of the Diocese of Central New York and the financial support of a Cincinnati woman named Mrs. Pendleton he prepared for the ministry. At

his baptism he honored her by making her name a part of his own. He served as a deacon until his death in 1931.

The first Native American priest was added to the calendar, Enmaegahbowh, a Canadian of the Ottawa tribe, who traveled throughout northern Minnesota and beyond to advance the mission strategy of the church in this land.

There are the Hawaiian monarchs Kamehameha and Emma who in 1860 asked the Bishop of Oxford to send Anglican missionaries to Hawaii to establish the Anglican Church in the islands.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was added in 1982, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Amelia Bloomer, Sojourner Truth and Harriet Ross Tubman some years later. They are remembered on the 20th of July as liberators and prophets.

Today we commemorate Justice Marshall, a layman and person of color, whose ministry was the law. It isn't often that we recognize the ministry of the baptized for all of our conversation about it. The Diocese of Washington proposed the addition to the calendar with leadership from St. Augustine's, the parish Marshall attended and where his widow still worship's. Marshall was born in Baltimore and baptized at St. Mary the Virgin, a small inner city congregation. During his years in New York he served on the vestry of St. Philip's, Harlem and was a deputy to the General Convention in St. Louis in 1964. It is said that Marshall walked out of the Convention when the deputies rejected a resolution endorsing King's campaign of non-violent resistance even though he himself had some reservations about it. The Dioceses of Maryland, New York and Washington have commemorated Marshall as has Seabury-Western Seminary in order to demonstrate to the next convention that this has grown beyond the local observance, and his example continues to inspire the pilgrim church.

All of this talk about the calendar and commemorations leads me to say a bit about the chapel soon to take shape in the south transept. Now that the floor and wainscoting are done it will be painted this week and the Chapel Planning Team has been discussing to whom it should be dedicated as well as how it should be furnished. The sense of the group is that it needs to be dedicated to the women commemorated in the windows, Sts. Elizabeth and Eunice. Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist and the cousin of Mary, and Eunice, the mother of Timothy, whose faith was commended by Paul are figures from scripture.

In the adjacent widow is Elizabeth of Hungary, born in 1207, whose charity led to the dedication of hospitals around the world. Married to Louis the IV of Thuringia at the age of 14, she bore three children, and with his support committed her dowry to almsgiving. Five years later, when she was all of 19, a famine and epidemic swept the land while her husband was out of the country and she sold her jewels to build a hospital

to care for those in need, and opened the granaries. A year later she was widowed at the age of 20, exiled from court with her children for her generous charity, and left destitute. She joined the Franciscans to continue to care for the poor and sick and died of exhaustion at the age of 24 in 1231.

All of these people are part of the communion of saints, that great cloud of witnesses into which we are incorporated in baptism. All of us are members of the Body of Christ and through him participate in the Divine life of God, the inter-Trinitarian life of God. Trinitarian theology asserts that *relationship* is fundamental to God's very being and that *community* is the foundation of God's interaction with the world.

Finally, while much is made of the fact that the doctrine of the Trinity is incomprehensible, the minute we say that we invariably go on to make a valiant effort to render it comprehensible, so we must at least laugh at ourselves a little.

God is far more vast than anything we can wrap our brains around and we all know that. And just as important, we all know that God is Love, God was, is now, and always will be Love. And love isn't about understanding or making sense. It is about trusting and committing ourselves to someone who is Other, transcendent, and ultimately incomprehensible.