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Sermon: Names, names, names
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Trinity Sunday, St. Michael's UCC
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2 Corinthians 13:11-13, Matthew 28:16-20

There was a young man from Tennessee whose parents had so many babies that they evidently ran out of inspiration when it came to naming their last baby. So, they named him J B. Just that, no names, just two letters. The two letters didn't stand for anything. They were not shorthand ways of referring to two longer names. His name was simply J B.

Well, as you can expect, as the poor kid grew up and found himself having to tell people his name, he grew very tired of people asking what his real name was. Worse yet, he had to fill out forms that asked for his name, and he got questions about that. J B grew to be very sensitive about his name.

Well, J B turned 16 and it was time for him to get his driver's license. He was determined that the state of Tennessee get his name right on his driver's license. So, he carefully filled out the form for his license. When it asked for his name, he wrote J(only) ... B(only) just to be absolutely clear about his name.

You can understand how JB felt when the person behind the DMV window handed him his brand-new driver's license. There was his name ... Jonly Bonly! [Thanks to the comedian from Tennessee, Henry Cho, for the joke about his friend!]

Names are important. And this Sunday is devoted to the Holy Trinity. There is a name for you ... the Holy Trinity ... what the heck does that mean?

Well, it is a name given by most Christians to God ... the ancient God of Israel ... the God who created all things, seen and unseen ... the alpha and the omega.

Two problems: first, the word Trinity does not appear in the Scriptures; second, God's chosen people were and are monotheists, believers in one God and one God only ... the word Trinity sounds as if Christians worship three gods.

Why should Christians worship the Holy Trinity if it is not in the Scriptures? Well, it turns out that often in the Scriptures God and Jesus and the Spirit appear together. For example, at the Creation God called the heavens and the earth into being ... the Gospel of John tells us that Jesus, the Word, was present at the Creation, being co-eternal with present with God. Think of Jesus as the architect or the blueprint for Creation if you want. The Spirit was present as well ... Genesis tells us that the Spirit moved across the face of the waters of chaos even before God said, "Let there be light."

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There are other examples but let's mention just two here. When Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River, the Holy Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove. God spoke from heaven, saying, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." In addition, at the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain, he was joined by the Spirit, symbolized by the bright, overshadowing cloud. From that cloud, God spoke, again saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him."

Both Scripture readings this morning bring the three persons of the Trinity together: Paul in a greeting, Jesus on how to fulfill the Great Commandment by baptism of new believers throughout the world in the names of the three persons of the Trinity.

That still leaves the second problem. How do we reconcile our concept of the Trinity with our believe in monotheism, one God, inherited from our Jewish forbears and affirmed by the teachings of Jesus?

It took hundreds of years for the theologians develop the formal concept of the Holy Trinity and to catch up with the actuality of Trinitarian Christian worship, belief, and practice. What is the doctrine of the Holy Trinity? In a sentence it is the affirmation by the church that "We believe in one God, Three-in-One, One-in-Three: God the Father and Creator, Jesus Christ, Son and Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit, Eternal Counselor."

Lots of people have tried to turn that complicated theology into easy examples to help ordinary Christians understand it. I may even have been guilty of that, especially when trying to explain the notion of the Trinity to children. For example, the Trinity is like a three-leaf clover, one plant with three leaves. Or the Trinity is like water ... it is all the same thing even though it can appear as a liquid or a solid (i.e., ice) or a gas (steam).

None of those attempts really work. God is not a plant. God has will and has agency and is the sovereign of all. Same thing with water ... God is not water, a created thing which flows or freezes or evaporates as determined by external factors. God is self-actualizing and not affected by such externalities. Remember what God in the burning bush told Moses ... I am that I am.

One of the most common mistakes that Christians make about the Holy Trinity is that in actual practice, we think of each person of the Trinity as we do human persons, individual in body and personality and mind. In so doing, as a matter of practical reality, we worship three Gods: the Father or Creator, Jesus the Son and Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit aka as the Paraclete, Counselor, Advocate, Comforter. Why do we do that? Well, God showed up first in Genesis, then came Jesus in the Gospels, finally there was the Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles. But those references, those sequenced appearances in time do not indicate that they were different gods.

Another mistake faithful Christians can make is to think of the Trinity as an actor who takes on different roles in this play that is the history of God's Creation. First, God puts on the make-up, mask, and costuming of the Creator. Then, later, he puts on the make-up, mask and costuming of

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a Jewish peasant and appears as Jesus. Finally, he masquerades as the wind or as a breath and appears as the Holy Spirit.

But God is not an actor and the three “roles” are not the same actor in different make-up. Such a view of God completely undercuts all the Scriptures about Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

Why would the Scriptures, especially in the New Testament, make such a point of talking about Jesus as the Son of God (four entire gospels!!) and the Holy Spirit (featured heavily in the Acts of the Apostles among other NT books) being sent by God if they were only God, the Father, underneath the mask, putting on an act?

Trying to explain the Holy Trinity is a little dispiriting for a pastor because the truth is that the Godhead is unexplainable. God is a mystery. The doctrine of the Holy Trinity is the organized Christian church’s best attempt to put what we think we know from the Scriptures into a name, an idea, that we can share within the church and to those outside the church curious enough to ask.

God is a mystery. But the mystery that is God is not a mystery like in a John Grisham or Robert Parker or Sue Grafton mystery. Those mysteries have a solution. At bottom we can figure out who did the murder or robbery or whatever.

God is a mystery ... fundamentally ... because no matter how much we know about God ... and God has generously revealed a great deal about God’s self in His Bible ... no matter how much we know, we will never penetrate to the full and complete knowledge of who God is. The pot cannot know everything about the potter ... table and chair cannot know the fullness of the woodworker ... sculpture cannot know everything about the sculptor. As God’s creatures, we are limited in our ability to comprehend our Creator.

No explanation I can give will explain fully God. And if I think I finally have the thing nailed down and explainable, I will be preaching and teaching some erroneous version. I will be committing a heresy. And if you leave here thinking you have finally had it explained and understand it fully, you will be just as wrong as this preacher.

So, why am I bothered about the Holy Trinity at all? Why am I bothering you with this sermon on a subject that to many people seems hopelessly abstract?

Well, first, it helps us make sense of the Scriptures. What are we to make of God, the Creator, sender of prophets, Father of Jesus, and the One who will perfect Creation even as he began it? What are we to make of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son, born incarnate of God through Mary and the Holy Spirit, dying for our sins, and raised for our participation in life eternal? What are we to make of the Holy Spirit, moving as a wind across the waters at Creation, present at Jesus’ baptism as a dove, and initiating the Christian church on the day of Pentecost shortly after Jesus’ death and resurrection?

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The Holy Trinity is our way of making sense of the Scriptures. We do not “believe in” the Holy Trinity. We believe in the living God of Israel who is present to us in three persons: Father, Son, Holy Spirit. That God, the three-in-one, the one-in-three, is attested in the Scriptures even if the Bible never actually uses the word “Trinity.”

I like the way that the Eastern Church (the Orthodox churches) approach the Trinity. From the Eastern church we get the notion of who God IS as opposed to Western emphasis on what God DOES. If we focus on what God does, the Godhead looks like a hierarchy with God on top with two subordinates, the Son and Spirit. This kind of image opens itself to patriarchal and monarchical and authoritarian images that can be damaging.

The typical model of the Trinity in the Eastern church is not a triangle with God on top but a circle that incorporates Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Seminaries once upon a time taught that the Trinity was like dancers in a circle ... an attractive vision in some ways ... but the image came from an inaccurate translation of a root Greek word. The word “perichoresis” that we once thought meant “dancing together” refers not to dance at all but the interpenetration of those in the circle.

The three persons of the Trinity are who they are because of their relationship with one another. The Father cannot be Father without the Son ... the Son cannot be Son without the Father ... neither can be who they are to one another without the love/Spirit that ties each to the other. The persons of the Holy Trinity are defined by their relationships with one another. And the love, the Spirit, that binds each to the other, that interpenetrates ... that same Spirit is the one we celebrate at Pentecost because it is so vast that that it moves out beyond the Godhead to incorporate all of Creation in God’s love.

This notion of being defined by our relationships with one another is a powerful one. Indeed, this relational theory may be present in the very structure of our universe. In the world of quantum physics, for example, an electron is what it is only with respect to something else. It is manifest only when it interacts with another object, even if that object is only the questing eye of the observer. These interactions are events that weave together what we perceive as reality. In this interdependent, interlocked world, the way to enlightenment is through cooperation, not confrontation. In my view that sounds very much like the work of the community of the Holy Trinity in creating, renewing, and sustaining the Creation.

The community of the Godhead, described by the term Holy Trinity, is one of love in which each person is defined in relationship with the other. It may be that quantum physics indicates that Creation itself is based on a kind of relationality that defines our reality. And the loving community of God’s Kingdom, here now in part and ultimately to be present in full, seems very much like the relational community of the Holy Trinity.

We are who we are because of our relationships with God and with one another. We are children of God because God created us to be loving children and neighbors. Only loving neighbors with

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the help of the Holy Spirit can form the kind of community that allows each to be who we were meant to be ... fully human, fully alive.

God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit ... the Holy Trinity ... are one as a divine community who live with and for and in one another in mutual openness, freedom, and self-giving love. This divine community is the model of all genuine human community ... of what community should look like in the church.

May it always be so.

Amen