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THE HOLY TRINITY

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Quotes from Barbara Brown Taylor

Matthew 28:16-20

¹⁶Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Today is the festival of the Holy Trinity, which hardly ranks as a big festival – at least as society ranks festivals. No one sends Holy Trinity cards, or sings Trinity Carols. The Trinity rabbit is not seen at shopping malls. But this is the day of the Holy Trinity and the paraments are white (just like they are on Christmas and Easter) and the ability to proclaim God as "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" has been the hallmark of orthodox Christianity since the earliest days of the Church.

It is a great day for theologians. It gives them a sense of usefulness. Ambrose Bierce said, "In religion, we believe only what we do not understand". And the doctrine of the Trinity is one of the most incomprehensible mysteries in the Christian repertoire of doctrines. That makes it especially appropriate for theologians, who seem to be attracted by the incomprehensible anyway.

Through no fault of its own, the Doctrine of the Trinity is the focus of attention for all the wrong reasons. It carries authority because it is what has been around for thousands of years as a way to depict God. Does anyone have something around the house, a decoration or a piece of furniture, that you never would have bought yourself? But it is precious to you

because it was treasured by your parents or grandparents and you would be incensed if anyone suggested you throw it away. I'm afraid Christians have often felt that way about the Doctrine of the Trinity. We treat it like it's far too cherished to get rid of, but useless. When enough old Christians die off, we may see the Doctrine of the Trinity for sale on ebay – those who are left hoping some other religion will want a pre-rational description of God and take it off our hands.

Let's see if we can take a few minutes to rehabilitate the Trinity's reputation.

Last Sunday was Pentecost, the last day of the Church Year that concentrates on Jesus' biography. The first part of the Church Year does just that – it tells the life story of Jesus. It starts with Advent and we spend four Sundays remembering the time of preparation for Jesus' coming. We remember his birth at Christmas and his revelation in Epiphany. We remember his suffering and death in Lent and his resurrection at Easter. The Holy Spirit came, as Jesus promised, at Pentecost – which we celebrated last Sunday.

Now we will spend the rest of the Church Year talking about *discipleship*. We will concentrate on how we live as followers of Christ. And we begin this half of the Church Year with a celebration of the Holy Trinity. Our Gospel lesson is the story of Jesus telling his disciples how to be the Church; he tells the apostles what to do – “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them, teaching them.” And he tells the disciples how they will have the inspiration to carry out his instructions; he says, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Right between telling the disciples what to do and telling us how they will be able to do it, Jesus gives us this ancient formula: “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” It is called the Great Commission; Jesus is summing up how we must live as disciples and there, in the middle of the Great Commission, Jesus drops the Holy Trinity.

Let's begin this season of discipleship by taking a close look at the kind of God we believe in.

Today is appointed for attention to the Doctrine of the Trinity – and it is important because the Trinity is how we must tell if the Gospel is true.

I think we have all gotten used to the doctrine of the Trinity as an appropriate ornament for the Christian faith – in good enough taste, but not practical for anything. The Trinity is not proclaimed as an expression of the good news of God's love. We learn it as a mathematical assertion: Three distinct entities and yet one God. When someone asks a question about the doctrine of the Trinity, it's easier to say, "Just believe".

The Holy Trinity is not an occasion to shout a demand for belief based on nothing but the authority of the shouter. It is an exploration of our experience of God.

The Gospel that God loves us is true. The Trinity tells us *how* he loves us and what he does in our lives.

(1)Let's start with creation - God the Father. Our first lesson this morning tells the story of creation and it makes a remarkable assertion. God created everything *on purpose*. There are implications to that. Creation does not just emanate from God. We are not a by-product of how God naturally is. God had the freedom to create us and all that is – or not to. The creation we live in and we, ourselves, are a deliberate choice on the part of God.

It is not the case that God does nothing more than provide the force to push along the pre-determined order of things. The story of creation continues today. It is God continuing to choose to create. Like partners in a marriage, like parents of children, God takes on something in the choice that he makes. God does more than just call creation into existence. The confession that God the Father Almighty is Creator of heaven and earth is the statement

that everything exists because God wants it. You are not here because of an accident or divine inattention.

God could be a part of creation, even the crucial part, and remain indifferent to it – and indifferent to us. That would be possible if he were part of creation. But it is not possible for the creator. The one who freely chooses to bring everything into existence.

The story we heard in Genesis speaks of humans as the image of God. We know that we can be indifferent to people and detached about our work and still fulfill our responsibilities with competence. But to *choose* a relationship with a person. To passionately *hope* for how this world can be. That means freely choosing to put ourselves in relationships with people and willingly serve the world.

There is a vulnerability in those choices. Those we love can hurt us when they hurt – especially when we are helpless to relieve their hurting. Those we love can hurt us because we must give them their own freedom and let them take risks. Worst of all, those we love can hurt us directly, turn against us. There is weakness in choosing to love rather than just participating in our surroundings as they already are.

That is the vulnerability that God takes upon himself. God is with us when we hurt. God gives us the freedom to take risks and explore all the possibilities we can imagine. God knows the pain of his children turning against him. That is the weakness that God has chosen so he can love us.

The Christian good news is not only that God is free to create, but also that God is free to suffer.

(2) That brings us to redemption – God the Son. It is in the cross of Jesus Christ that suffering ultimately and definitively became part of the history of God with the world. God chose to be part of our suffering lives.

God the Son is what brings God to us. What will we do about it? How will we live as people who have God in their lives?

(3)That brings us to inspiration – God the Holy Spirit. God is present in our lives today – two thousand years after the successfully completed crucifixion of Jesus. God continues to guide us and call us to make our own choices and create our own responses to God's love.

We live in the presence of God and that is our understanding of the Trinity. As a *description of God*, the Trinity is a beloved and useless bit of clutter in the church's parlor. As an *encounter with God* – the Trinity is an thrilling experience of our life as the divine image we were created to be.

Of course, it is troublesome that our encounters with God are rarely the same twice in a row. Some days God comes as a judge, confronting us with the messes we have made. Other days God comes as a shepherd, protecting us and nourishing us. Some days God comes as a whirlwind and blows away everything we knew for sure. Other days God is a drudge calling us to our daily responsibilities. God the teacher, the challenger, the helper, the stranger; the friend, the healer, the confuser, the hope.

The God who made us is three persons – and one God. That is the God we worship. So we should also celebrate that we have an infinite diversity of people. And we should never doubt that this infinite diversity is all one humanity.

We are beginning the Sundays after Pentecost, the second half of the Church Year. Next week, the paraments will be green and they will mostly stay that way until the first part of December. We are going to talk about how to live as followers of Jesus Christ. The Trinity is a proclamation of the mystery and power that will instruct us and enable us to live the lives God the Father has created, God the Son has redeemed, and God the Holy Spirit has inspired.