

The Divine Question and the Human Question

Psalm 8; Genesis 1:1-2:3; Matthew 28:16-20

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Churches of Portland and Decatur, Indiana on Trinity Sunday, June 11, 2017]

I

A little girl in Sunday school was feverishly drawing with crayons.

Her teacher asked her what she was drawing.

The little girl responded, "I am drawing a picture of God."

"But, my dear," the teacher said, "nobody knows what God looks like."

Without even missing a beat, the little girl said: *"They will when I'm finished."*

II

Maybe that reminds you of some little ones you have known;
it certainly makes me think of my own daughters at a young age.

That little girl's description of her task—
to draw a picture of God—
is what theology is all about.

Theology seeks to help us draw in our minds and hearts a picture of God.

It is also what one of our most essential, defining, and confusing doctrines—
the doctrine of the Trinity—
is about.

Today is Trinity Sunday.

In 1334 A.D. Pope John XXII designated the Sunday after Pentecost as a day for the Christian Church to think about and celebrate one of its core beliefs—
the triune nature of God.

The trouble is that most “big” Sundays in the church year have a good story attached to them.

At Christmas, we have Mary and Joseph,
 the journey to Bethlehem,
 baby Jesus in the manger,
 the shepherds,
 the angels,
 Wise Men,
 and all the rest.

At Easter we’ve got the big story—
 the Passion and crucifixion of Jesus
 and the celebration of his resurrection.

And Pentecost, which we celebrated last Sunday,
 we have the story of the disciples gathering in the upper room,
 the Holy Spirit,
 the wind of God,
 blowing through the place—
 flames of fire,
 speaking in unknown languages,
 and everyone thinking the disciples are drunk.

III

But what about Trinity Sunday?

What are we to make of the only Sunday in the church year that centers on a doctrine?

God in three persons, blessed Trinity, as the great hymn puts it.

It is difficult to understand and even more difficult to explain.

To Jews and Muslims, the Trinity sounds like polytheism—three gods.

To Unitarians, the Trinity sounds like an unnecessary complication of God’s singularity and oneness.

To many ordinary believers it is simply confusing.

The story is told of a man who collapsed suddenly on a busy city sidewalk, apparently the victim of a heart attack.

A priest happened to be walking by and rushed to his side, knelt over and said,
“Are you baptized?”

Faintly and with effort he nodded his head.

“But are you baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit?” the priest urgently asked.

The man opened one eye and said to the crowd which had gathered,
“Here I am, dying, and he’s asking me riddles!”

For the early Christians the doctrine of the Trinity was more than a riddle—
it was a way of answering the divine question: **Who is God?**

The answer that came out of their experience was God with three personas—
the word ‘persona’ referring to the masks actors wore in the Roman theater.

One God expressed in three personas—
three roles, if you will—
three ways the one God is made known to us:

As God the Father, the Creator of all that is.

As God the Son, the Word incarnate, who suffered, died, and rose again.

As God the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, the mysterious ongoing presence of
God in the world and in our lives.

There are many convoluted ways people have sought to explain the Trinity:
like the analogy of water as liquid, steam and ice;
or the egg with its yoke, whites, and shell;
or the analogy of the three roles a person plays:
e.g., I am husband, father, brother.

And just yesterday I came across a new analogy, from a baker:

The Trinity is like a cake, consisting of eggs, flour, and sugar.

The ingredients react with each other,
 they affect each other,
 change each other,
 but in order for a cake to be a cake,
 they all have to be there in just the right proportions. (Swanson)

If you've read the book or seen the movie "The Shack," you saw the Trinity portrayed in a very anthropomorphic, or human, way—
 God the Father, "Papa," as a black woman;
 God the Son as a Middle Eastern man;
 God the Spirit as an Asian woman.

But ultimately all of these efforts to make sense of the Trinity fall short, causing Robert Farrar Capon to say that trying to describe the Trinity is "like a bunch of oysters trying to describe a ballerina."

The mystery of the Trinity is **not how one person can also be three persons**, but how we can refer **to three separate individuals in the singular, as one**.

The mystery is how Father, Son and Holy Spirit can be so united in love,
 so much part of the same mission,
 so much in fellowship one with another,
 that we call them one God—
 that's the mystery. (Van Tholen, p. 141)

Presbyterian writer and theologian Frederick Buechner put it this way:

"...the Trinity is an assertion that, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, there is only one God.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit mean that the mystery beyond us, the mystery among us, and the mystery within us are all the same mystery. Thus the Trinity is a way of saying something about us and the way we experience God."

He goes on to say that the doctrine of the Trinity is also a way of saying something about God and the way God is within God's self—
 that is, God does not need the creation in order to have someone to love,
 since God loves perfectly within God's self.

The other thing that is important about the Trinity is how it addresses the way human beings think of themselves...
 who they are in their essence...
 and what their purpose in life is.

Theologians have always known that to think and talk about God is also to think and talk about humanity.

Both John Calvin and Karl Barth taught that theology is also anthropology.

The divine question is also the human question.

The flip side of the divine question—
“Who is God?”—
 is the human question—
“Who am I?”

Both of these questions are addressed in the Bible's very first chapter,
 the story of creation, to which we now turn.

IV

The account of creation in the first two chapters of Genesis is often in the news.

Fundamentalists insist that it is literal history and biology and geology.

Young Earth Creationists insist that it be taught in public schools alongside the theory of evolution.

The Creation Museum in Hebron, Kentucky and the Ark Encounter theme park in Williamstown, Kentucky are devoted to this view.

But Genesis 1 is not meant to be taken literally
 and was never intended to be read as history.

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It is, says OT Professor Walter Brueggemann,
“a theological reflection on God’s creative activity, not reportage.”

It is an exclamation of praise,
a hymn to creation and the Creator,
not a lesson in geology, biology, or history.

What Genesis says about God and about human beings gets lost in the heat of arguments about—
were the seven days of creation 24 hour days...
did it all happen about 6000 years ago...
was Eve really made from Adam’s rib...
and where in the world did Cain get a wife to marry?

What the story says about God and what it says about us is very important.

Professor Brueggemann points out it was written at a particular time and for a particular purpose.

Genesis 1 was composed during the exile in Babylon and it addresses some important questions for Israel:

Where was Yahweh our God in this time of national calamity?

Why did God send us into exile?

Why did our faith fail us and allow the Babylonian gods to prevail?

That is the context and it is a desperate one.

The very survival of the Jewish people is at stake.

The writer suggests that God is the creator still,
the creator of all reality,
even Babylonian reality.

Creation reflects God’s nature and will and, above all, God’s love.

God’s spirit, hovering over the formless chaos at the creation,

hovers still and is still creating.

Human beings are created in God's image
and have within them God's breath, God's spirit.

The writer suggests that creation is good, all of it—
not evil, as some religions taught.

The material, physical, and sensual world of touch, smell, sound, and taste reflects
the glory of God;
and it is very good, all of it.

And notice also that, unlike all other religions of that time,
men and women together reflect the image of God.

The writer breaks into the full flower of Hebrew poetry to express how humankind
is the crowning act of creation:

*“So God created humankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.”* (verse 27)

The sexuality of human beings is part of God's plan
and it, too, is good,
not evil, as some religions have taught.

V

So Genesis 1 seeks to answer the divine question—**who is God?**

The question of God is also the human question in this remarkable story.

Notice that human beings are created last,
the crowning achievement of God's work,
and are given special responsibility for the rest of creation.

They are to be **co-creators** with God.

Genesis 1 teaches that we are God's agents,
God's stewards,

and that we are to tend and care for this earth.

Unfortunately, in the pollution of our air, water, and soil,
 in the waste of our natural resources,
 and in the threat of global climate change,
 we see the tragic results of our failure to learn this lesson

Notice also that God speaks to human beings alone in the course of creation.

Human beings alone speak to God in return.

Just as the Triune God—
 Father, Son, Holy Spirit—
 is in relationship with God's self,
 so human beings are created for relationship—
 for fellowship.....
 friendship.....
 intimacy.....
 and love.

The writer of Psalm 8 reflects powerfully on this truth when he says:

Oh Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
 the moon and the stars that you have established;
 what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
 mortals that you care for them?*

*Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
 and crowned them with glory and honor.*

That was revolutionary thinking in 545 B.C.,
 and it still is in 2017 A.D.

As it confronted the challenge of the Jewish exiles living in the midst of an alien
 Babylonian culture 2500 years ago,
 so today it challenges our culture and the ways it demeans and diminishes
 our humanity.

VI

The divine question is always also the human question.

Who are we?

From its very first page the Bible tells us that we are created in the image of God and that God has given us special responsibility—

“Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” (Genesis 1:28)

That is who we are, each one of us.

But one of the realities in this world is that we are mostly a function of what we do—our jobs,

our titles,

our academic degrees,

our rank and privilege.

Peter Gomes told of lecturing to a convention of Fortune 500 CEO’s in Boston.

“One did not really need to ask them what they did,” he says, “for they had their names, their companies, their positions on name cards on their left breasts; President and CEO of this, Chairman and Managing Director of that, Chief of Operations of this . . . while it was clear they were more than their jobs, they nevertheless took the major part of their identity from their work, and their work was defined by that little title on their left breast.”

(Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living, p. 122)

Gomes comments,

“One of the recurring nightmares for people who define themselves in this way, by what they do, happens when they no longer do what defines them.”

There is, thanks be to God, an alternate word...

a world that comes from the heart of our faith.

You are a child of God,
 created by God and given freedom,
 crowned with dignity,
 called to a great responsibility,
 given a Great Commission.

In our Gospel lesson, Matthew 28:16-20, Jesus sends us forth as his personal representatives.

As we go we are to make disciples of all peoples...
 baptizing them into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit...
 teaching them what it was like to be with Jesus
 so they can follow him as well.

And Jesus reminds us that as we carry on his work, we are not alone.

He himself will be with us to the end of the age.

We are children of God by creation;
 we are disciples of Jesus Christ by redemption;
 we are co-creators with God in the world God created and blessed.

Nothing can ever take that away from you.

Not an insensitive boss,
 not your job being out-sourced to India,
 not an oppressive political system,
 not retirement,
 not aging or illness or death,
 not racism,
 not prejudice
 nor rejection by anyone.

Quaker philosopher Parker Palmer wrote:

“The great spiritual gift is to know for certain that who I am does not depend on what I do. Identity does not depend on titles. It does not depend on degrees. It doesn’t depend on functioning. It only depends on the single fact that I am a child of God, valued and treasured for what I am.”

VIII

Martha Beck and her husband were Harvard professors;
 “driven academics” is how they described themselves.

But then they discovered in that their unborn son had Down syndrome and would be born severely handicapped.

They ignored the advice of friends and colleagues and allowed their baby to be born.

They named him Adam, and then Martha Beck wrote a book about her experience with a Down syndrome child, dedicating it to all parents who “raise exceptional children and end up feeling privileged.”

The book included a remarkable quote about the goodness of creation, the God-given dignity of every human being, and the way you and I co-create, with God, the world around us.

Martha was invited to speak about her experience with Adam to the entering class at Harvard Medical School:

“Adam was asleep on my lap at the time, wearing a bow tie and a dreamy expression. After the speech I was approached by an elderly professor...He had just become the grandfather of a little girl with Down. As he talked to me, he stroked Adam’s soft blond hair and wept. He loved his granddaughter with inexplicable openness and the experience had changed his whole life. Now there’s a doctor with some real information to offer parents of a (special) baby. Whoever said that love is blind was dead wrong. Love is the only thing on this earth that lets us see each other with the remotest accuracy.” (New York Times Review of Books, May 16, 1999)

VIII

Sisters and brothers, the divine question is, **who is God?**

The Christian answer is the Holy Trinity...
 the mystery of God beyond us, God among us, God within us.

The human question is, **who are you?**

The Christian answer is, you are God's beloved child.

You belong to God who created you and crowned you with glory and honor

God's Son died for you.

God's Spirit dwells within you.

God calls you to bring the Gospel of Jesus to all peoples.

All that is left is to remind ourselves of what Jesus told us:

Lo, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

In the name of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God.

Amen.

Sources:

John M. Buchanan, sermon preached May 30, 1999, Chicago, Illinois.

Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking, p. 93

Peter Gomes, *Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, p. 103

Richard Swanson, "A Provocation: Trinity Sunday," June 7, 2017 retrieved from <https://provokingthegospel.wordpress.com/2017/06/07/a-provocation-trinity-sunday-june-11-2017-matthew-2816-20/>.

James R. Van Tholen, Where All Hope Lies, p. 141.