

Trinity Sunday 2017

Sermon 6.11.17

Scripture: Genesis 1:1-2:4  
Matthew 28:16-20

The first word is always the most difficult—deciding upon that first word, first sentence, the first thought. Prior to this decision, it's all potential, even perfection. The blank page, the blank canvas, the formless void: they're empty, but they're also flawless. To a certain way of thinking, all you can do from here is mess it up—unless you clear it up.

Because that's the risk you run with intelligibility. In order to be understood, you need to impose some order on all that formlessness. Yes, then begins the process of narrowing down—all possibility becomes narrower, specific. Sure, then *all* possibility becomes just *this* possibility, made all the narrower with each added act of creativity—each additional word or brushstroke and chiseling away. No longer is everything possible, now only this is, at least for now, at least this time around. And maybe it'll be a disappointment, land in a fallen state. Or maybe it will be clear, and clarifying: complete.

But regardless of how it ends up, only in this can anything be understood.

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I remember when we got the ultrasound reports for each of our pregnancies, each of our kids, each of our *boys*. That's when we found out the first specificity. We were fine with the result, happy: a boy! A boy! But it was a little disappointing too. Now no longer was *everything* possible.

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I also remember the early days of Tobias, and then the early days of Jack. Those first few days, weeks, I understood the creation story anew. Those first few months repeatedly called to mind the formless void of the beginning, then the (slowly, slowly) defining of things, the gradual imposition of order.

For a while with each of them (first Tobias, then Jack), time meant nothing—sleep and eat in random rotation, and sometimes even simultaneously, no matter whether day or night. Then (slowly, slowly) arising from the darkened deep of meaningless time, islands of distinct wakefulness or clear sleep emerged. Patterns showed themselves—happy time, quiet alert, grumpy exhausted. Now emotion had clear cause: delight at a certain sight, anger at a

discernable discomfort. There was light and dark, there was ocean and dry land, there were particulars, there were purposes and functions and aims.

And now we were beginning to be intelligible to one another—these mysterious, powerful, terrifying infants; this all-powerful, all-encompassing mother, pair of parents; these separate but related beings that now had to communicate across a boundary, now that there was a boundary.

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Today is Trinity Sunday. Today we celebrate the doctrine of the Trinity.

Hooray!

There's no scriptural source for the Trinity. There's no scriptural cause for justifying God as Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, or Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit, what have you. There's no story behind this formulation—no equivalent to Christmas, which has us understand God as incarnate; no equivalent to Easter and the resurrection accounts, which arouse our confession of a general resurrection; no equivalent to the Ascension of Jesus, when he was seen to have been taken up as if on a cloud, or to Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was felt to have come down. No, Trinity Sunday: there's no story to tell about this day.

Yes, scripture intimates at the formulation: the three strangers who come out of the desert to tell to Abraham and Sarah that they'll soon bear a son; the three figures, glowing white, on the mountaintop—Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. There are plenty of threes that signify the divine in the Bible.

Then there's this one writer of scripture, Matthew, who recounts this formulation. He has it in Jesus, resurrected, now commissioning the disciples to go out and baptize all nations in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. But even this sort of comes out of the blue. These are, after all, the final verses of an otherwise pretty long gospel, and moreover a gospel that is particularly concerned with what has come before, concerned that what is revealed in Christ is a continuation or a fulfillment of what has come before. Really, Matthew quotes scripture—that is, the Old Testament—more than 60 times in his 28 chapters, which is to say nearing three times per chapter. But this one final thought: it's unmoored from any of these things, either what Matthew has said prior, or what his points of reference have said prior. You can even imagine the disciples—those first commissioned disciples—wondering, “Huh? Where'd that come from?”

A question we might ask as well: whence Trinity Sunday? Or even, whence the Trinity? Why does Christianity assert that God is the three-in-one, a notion that seems absurd—if not theologically then in every other aspect. Three = One? Absurd. Or, to quote Lisanne from the other night, at the lectionary meditation group: “It’s all hoo-hah.” It’s all made up. It’s just an imposition of human terms on the mysterious divine.

And this is to beg a further question, why bother with this doctrine, or with *any* doctrine for that matter? When it comes to the so-called varieties of religious experience, why bother with anything as systematic as a doctrine?

To some extent, this is a question that courses through our life together as a UCC congregation, just as it does the larger UCC.

That’s our denomination, you might know, or maybe not. The United Church of Christ: it’s unique among the mainline denominations (that is, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Disciples of Christ, and the UCC). It’s unique for its not having a central doctrine that members of the church are expected to adhere to. This has less to do with a sentiment about doctrine itself, it should be said, and more to do with the UCC’s conviction that the local church is to have absolute autonomy. But, whatever: there is no hierarchy in our denomination that disseminates orthodoxies in terms of practice, confession, or belief. Such things are for each congregation to decide for itself.

So, we have, I suppose. We of this congregation have decided, if tacitly, not to have a central doctrine as a basis for membership. What seems to guide membership here is participation in worship and community, and a commitment to the way of Christ and him crucified—living by that self-giving way however each of us, and all of us together, can.

But, even given this, I always have us remember Trinity Sunday, and I always attempt to preach on it, though it’s not the most gratifying of Sundays for preaching.

I wonder why. Why do I do this? It’s my choice, after all. Like I said, we don’t have any hierarchy in our denomination that determines what we’re to do together, or to think about together, on any given Sunday. That’s up to me, and up to us. So why do I bother with Trinity Sunday?

When I was a kid, church-goer that I was, doctrine was never a part of it, not that I remember. Really, God was a bit of a mess in my life, and all to the good. Everywhere all the time, God was present and responsive and kind and gentle, and expected me to be likewise.

God was in nature, God was in music and books, God was in *me* while also was one who laid claim on me—protected me that I not squander myself away, owned me that I not toss myself aside. God was a sloshing reality that permeated everything, that was most explicitly spoken of (and to) in church, but was by no means only to be found there or even best to be found there (though I could pretty reliably be found there). God was the mind and heart by which I had my being, and Jesus had something to do with all that, and the Holy Spirit was out and about all the time, and I could just go forth knowing that all this was this was the case.

As for doctrine?

I'm not sure when that came into my faith. Doctrine, as something distinct from experience though also related to experience for its giving name to experience and a frame for experience: I'm not sure when that came in. Maybe not until as late as Divinity School? In my late 20s? Was I really that incurious and self-involved?

But as it did come into my thinking (slowly, slowly), I realize now that it opened a way for me to be in community with others in faith, in *communion* as regards this experience and sensibility that had until now been so very much my own. It opened a way for me to access others' experience, others' need. It made the Christian faith feel relevant, even important, in a social sense. It gave ground to its historical presence and energy to its future-oriented purpose. It gave it breadth and depth, gravity and not just light.

Funny, I think doctrine made it so I could think about this experience of spirit as something other than intensely private, as instead something that is intensely *human*.

And this makes me think that perhaps the formulation that is the Trinity isn't simply a human formulation, a human imposition onto the sloshing, permeating mystery that is "God." Because that's what I was wondering while heading into this week following our talking about it on Monday night: did we make up the Trinity in order to make God more intelligible to us, or is God truly to be manifest exclusively within this (albeit far-ranging) formulation? Or (a third way; always seek that third way!) did God deign Godself into this human-made formulation in order to be intelligible to us?

Well...

If we made it up, then we can rest assured at least that God did that first. If we made up this orderly way of interacting with and understanding God (Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, what have you), then we can rest assured that God, whose slowly ordering the

creation, was the first to impose order — and on us — that there might intelligibility, and that by this intelligibility there might be relationship. God imposes the order that gives rise to our being at all, and then we impose an order (Father, Son, Spirit) that gives rise to our relationship with God.

That sounds okay.

But, if God revealed this to us as a fundamental truth about God — revealed, though not in scripture, yet in the theological tradition that would soon follow — then one implication is that God has opened up several avenues for understanding God, and for being in relationship with God. Through acts of creativity (in imitation of the Creator), through acts of mission and justice (in imitation of the Christ), through acts of communion and community, through interacting with the world into which the Spirit has been wildly unleashed (the sciences, the arts and humanities, work of sustenance or maintenance, works or stewardship and care): there are so many ways to meet the truly Triune God, to participate in this nexus of relationships among the entities of the Triune God.

That sounds pretty good, too. This doctrine *as* divine revelation, something we know not for having created it but for having received it — a fine line I realize, for what's the discernable difference between knowledge we've imagined for ourselves and knowledge that's been revealed to us from some other realm, which we've then received? What's the discernable difference between these two things? Our secular society would have us know — *know* — that there is no other realm from which to receive anything, so it's *all* made up, it's all human construct. But I'm not the most obedient person. So I'd ask that assertion, how do we know that's how we know? You who worship at the altar of material provability: what's the material proof of that?

So, then there's this third way — that God, in seeing our formulation of God, then deigned Godself to fit within our formulation. We aim to make God intelligible to us, and God responds by making Godself fit within our formulation of intelligibility. God as so responsive to us, and then self-limiting for us, all in order to be known by us: that's sweet. But if that's the case, then we need to be mindful not to demand that God limit Godself overmuch. Let's not be so doctrinaire that the doctrine becomes not as a means to truth but as truth itself.

Not that I think overly doctrinaire is a risk we particularly run: one Sunday a year, maybe two.

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From here we embark into ordinary time, the portion of the church year that witnesses God at work in the ordinary days. It's the longest portion of the church year, encompassing the longest season (Pentecost) and then some.

I have to say it often comes to me as a relief. I happen to love the every-day. I happen to look forward to my regular cup of coffee in the morning (okay, four), getting the boys off to school in a timely way everyday, walking the dogs, catching up on the news and then heading out into my day. Really, the older I get, the more I realize one my now favorite lines from a hymn might always have been my favorite, if I'd have always known it: "Let our ordered lives confess the beauty of thy peace."

I know good order might not sound nearly exciting enough to hold much interest. I even had a conversation with a colleague to this effect recently. Nearing the end of her career as a pastor, she'd recently heard from the congregation she served prior to moving to the Berkshires. She'd heard that they were describing her tenure among them as a "stabilizing" time. She was a source of stability. She seemed deflated at this description.

"I like stability," I told her, and she looked honestly surprised at this. I mean, who says that? We're supposed to like change. We're supposed to like novelty, innovation. "I row," I told her. "And I'm trying to improve at rowing in a racing single." These are famously easy to capsize, something I've done myself. It isn't fun. So I attended a rowing clinic I attended with the goal to come away able to stabilize a single to the point where I could actually enjoy myself and now make it move.

Recently, I've taken to rowing the most responsive single we have at Berkshire Rowing, the most sensitive and least stable. I can do it now. So, after two years, I feel like I'm finally ready to get to work.

It's not for nothing that the church is sometimes called the Old Ship of Zion. And I figure if we stabilize *this* vessel, then we can do the work of mission and justice, we can do the work of grief and healing as we need, we can do the work of learning toward wisdom and forgiving toward reconciliation, we can do the work of the gospel.

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That's it. Once again, the first word leads to something complete—and it never fails to amaze me. The risk of intelligibility mostly pays off. Not perfectly, I realize. There's a lot we didn't get to, a lot that's still not clear. So we'll give it another go next week.

Meanwhile, thanks be to God.