

Our Relational God

Trinity Sunday ~ June 15, 2003

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passages

Mark 1:9-11 (NRSV)

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Mark 12:28-31 (NRSV)

²⁸One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" ²⁹Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' ³¹The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

Today, we continue a nine-week sermon series on all the symbols in our glorious Rose Window. Our fifth symbol is the fleur-de-lis, representing the Trinity.

The Living God – personal and triune

When Jesus was a very young boy, he would have been taught to recite the Shema, a Jewish prayer built on the verse from Deuteronomy that Jesus quotes in today's passage from Mark: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one."¹ As a devout Jew, Jesus would have recited this prayer morning and evening. The Shema was akin to a battle cry of oppressed Israel, who had endured centuries of foreign domination. Despite this domination, the Jews of Jesus' day remained fiercely monotheistic, making them unique in the ancient world.

Despite the pantheons of gods offered up by competing religions, the Jews insisted that there was one, and only one, God - YHWH - who had created all that there is and had chosen Israel to be the means of creation's renewal. The first Christians had been Jews and they remained fervent monotheists. But this soon posed a significant problem for them. Jesus said and did things that only God could say and do! Who was Jesus? Could he possibly be God himself? But how could this be if there is only one God? In the writings of the New Testament, we can see the first Christians coming to understand that God had revealed, through Jesus, his deeper nature. Namely, that while there is unity in God (yes, there is one God!) there is also community, fellowship, and love in God's very being. In many ways, John's gospel is written to convince readers that Jesus is fully God (see the opening paragraph of John's gospel!). From this beginning, Christians came to believe and proclaim that God is triune - one God, three persons.



The Fleur-de-lis

The fleur-de-lis is one of many symbols that try to convey our proclamation that God is triune - one and three. Here, there is one flower with three petals. We might have a symbol with three overlapping and interlocking rings. We might have a triangle enclosed by a circle or a circle enclosed by a triangle. Any of these symbols would suffice . . . and none of them.

We must remember that all attempts to describe the Trinity in symbols or in words fall short of the mysteries of God. We cannot fully explain how it is that there is one God and yet three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Yet we do proclaim just that! The Father is fully and completely God, but not all of God. Jesus is fully and completely God, but not all of God. The Holy Spirit is fully and completely God, but not all of God. The three are not to be ranked. They are not simply different manifestations of God at different times. God is truly three and one.

¹ This verse from Deuteronomy (the fifth book of the Old Testament) can be translated as "the Lord is one" or "the Lord alone." We probably shouldn't take it to be an ancient Jewish statement about God's "inner being." Rather, it is a cry that there is only one God and that God is YHWH, the God of Israel.

Without question, for many Christians the whole notion of the trinity is one of the most perplexing and seemingly irrelevant doctrines of the faith. Though we might affirm a statement something like this, “We believe in one God, who has always known himself as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,²” it can be pretty hard for us to see how this makes much sense or how it matters to our lives as Christians. Yet, our belief in a personal, triune God is foundational to all that makes Christianity unique among the world’s major religions.

God is love . . . God is community . . . God is relational

In a letter, John wrote, “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” (1John 4:16b) What do you think John meant by saying ~ “God is love”? Did he mean that God loves more than anyone? Or that God loves without ceasing? Or perhaps that God loves truly? All this is accurate, but it isn’t the same thing as saying that God is love. After all, it seems almost nonsensical. Love must have an object. We love something or we love someone. How could any single person, in isolation, be love? However, when we proclaim that God is unity in three persons, then the statement that God is love makes perfect sense. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit have always been, are now, and always will be in loving relationship with one another. God is love because God is inherently relational. The loving relationships among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit form the basis of God’s very essence. The three persons of the Godhead³ live in eternal community, in a loving community of three persons.

This Tuesday, June 17, is the 300th anniversary of John Wesley’s Birth!

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was born on June 17, 1703. He died in 1791. Wesley was Oxford-educated and an ordained minister in the Church of England. While at Oxford, John and his brother, Charles, led a “holy club” devoted to Bible study and the practice of holiness. Their disciplined and methodical approach to the Christian life led some to call them derisively “methodists” or “Bible moths.” Yet, John Wesley began a movement in Christendom that now incorporates nearly 100 million Christians worldwide!

Wesley devoted his life to helping Christians experience the compassionate love of Christ, keeping together a faith of the head, the heart, and the hands. Wesley called Christians to a life of practical holiness built on loving God and neighbor. Following Wesley’s example, Methodists are committed to the Bible. We are committed to social justice and the renewal of all creation. We are committed to community. As Wesley once wrote, “Christianity is essentially a social religion; to turn it into a solitary religion is to destroy it.”

We too are relational . . . created for community

Though the fleur-de-lis focuses us on the nature of God, there is a fundamental truth about humankind here . . . we are created for community. The opening chapters of Genesis tell us that humans are made in God’s image. We too are inherently relational; we are made to live in loving relationship with God and one another. It should surprise no one that Jesus reminded the scribe that loving God and neighbor are the two great commandments. We are created to love!

Frankly, it is a mistake to believe that the sole focus of our Christian life is to be our personal relationship with Jesus. Rather, our relationship with Jesus Christ is to be lived out in relationship with others. We are called not to isolation, but to fellowship and communion. We baptize our children into this community of God’s people and we are responsible for doing all we can to build it up. Thus, a key test for any congregation, not just St. Andrew, is whether others see community in us. Are we inviting? Are we welcoming? Are we involved in the life of St. Andrew or do we just show up for church an hour each week (or every other week!)? This gets to the very heart of the Gospel and is why our joyful proclamation of a triune, relational God is such Good News to those who feel isolated and alone. Truly, there is nothing dry or “academic” about our doctrine of the Trinity!

² In the UMC, we say this much more formally: “There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body or parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the maker and preserver of all things, both visible and invisible. And in the unity of this Godhead there are three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.” from our Articles of Religion, in the 2002 *Book of Discipline*. These Articles were adopted in 1804!

³ Yet another way to express God’s unity-in-threeness. You’ll find that people use many words and images in the effort to express the unity and relationality of God. Most of these efforts are helpful, but none are complete or wholly sufficient. If you think that you’ve got the mysteries of the Trinity all figured out, you are wrong!

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Deuteronomy 6:4; Ezekiel 20:5-20 The one true God is the God who saved the Israelites</p>	<p>Day 2 1 Corinthians 15:20-28; 2 Corinthians 4:4-6 God and Jesus Christ are clearly distinct</p>
<p>Day 3 John 1:1-5 & 14:8-14 John stresses the unity of the Father and Jesus</p>	<p>Day 4 John 15:26-27; 16: 4-14 The close relationship between Jesus and the Spirit</p>
<p>Day 5 2 Corinthians 13:13; Matthew 28:19; 1 Corinthians 12:4-6 “Trinitarian formulas” in the NT</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

