
Neapolitan Ice Cream Day

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
Trinity Sunday

What a grand day this is! It is Trinity Sunday, the only major feast day of the Christian Church celebrating a doctrine rather than an event!

Yes, every other major feast day of the Church has to do with a major historical event, either in the life of Jesus or in the life of the Church. Christmas is about the birth of Jesus; Epiphany is about the wise men of other religions seeking out Jesus; Lent is about forty days in the wilderness. Good Friday is the crucifixion of Jesus. Easter, of course, is the Resurrection. These are all, for the most part, historical events. Pentecost, too, last week's feast day, observing the coming of the Holy Spirit, is an historical event.

But not today. Trinity Sunday is not a feast concerning an historical event. Trinity Sunday is a feast day celebrating a doctrine: "the perfect unity of God in three distinct persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

Now, doctrines are pretty boring things to celebrate, aren't they? I'll never forget an EFM group I was leading almost twenty years ago. EFM stands for Education for Ministry. It is a four-year, very demanding course of Christian theology of community. We talked a lot about doctrine in that course, for folks who brought that kind of curiosity to the evenings.

One day, a woman walked in, finally flustered by the whole "doctrine" thing. The nuances of letters and logic, arguments and essays, had finally gotten to her. "You know," she said, "when I am lying sick in the hospital bed, longing to be comforted by love and hope, the last thing I need is for someone to walk in and start talking about the Nicene Creed!"

Well, she had obviously not heard about my favorite explanation the doctrine of the Trinity. Today is the day for...Neapolitan Ice Cream! My favorite definition of the Trinity! What is the best way to describe how God can be One God in Three Persons? By reminding ourselves of Neapolitan Ice Cream. It is not just vanilla ice cream, not just chocolate ice cream, not just strawberry ice cream! God is the best of all the ice creams, all together!

I wouldn't call this Trinity Sunday. My name for this day is Neapolitan Ice Cream Day!

Now, we recite the Nicene Creed almost every week in church. It is a creedal statement of nuance and careful balance. It is the result of logic and letters, arguments and essays. But what does it do? Does it comfort us?

What is going on when we say it?

Here is what is going on. It is a family story. I believe it is a family reunion story, telling over and over again the various ways that God loves us. Consider family reunions. When we gather at family reunions, we sit around the table, or in the den, or out in the yard, and we tell stories. We tell stories that are familiar to many of us. They are most familiar to the older among us.

In fact, the stories are so familiar, that they do not need a lot of detail. When the stories actually happened, they were full of much detail. But the more we tell the story, the less detail we need in order to make the reference, or in order to make the point. (The less detail we need, that is, unless it is old Uncle Joe, or old Aunt Matilda. When they tell the story, the detail becomes greater, doesn't it?)

The doctrine of the Trinity is the nugget of a family story. The doctrine of the Trinity is the nectar of a distilled family story. The Nicene Creed is the outline, the skeleton, of entire body of detail and logic.

No one person came up with the doctrine of the Trinity one day, as if by divine revelation. It is not explained in detail in any one chapter of the Holy Scripture. It is the result of faithful Christians telling stories of how God loves us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The doctrine of the Trinity is the family story of the early Christian Church. It is a story we tell today so that we can be reminded where we come from.

The doctrine was hinted at in the Nicene Creed of 325 AD. But that form of the creed is not the one we read today. It was modified by the year 381, at the Council of Chalcedon. Now, I believe that these councils were not really councils. I think they were family meetings. The Nicene Creed came from the Family meeting of Nicea. The Chalcedon Creed came from the Family Meeting of Chalcedon in 381.

But the doctrine of Trinity -one perfect God in unity of three persons""was defined in even greater detail by the Athanasian Creed, dating to the late fifth century (page 864 in the BCP). This creed shows great influence from good old Saint Augustine. If any family member had more to do with the shaping of the doctrine of the Trinity, it is good old grandfather, Saint Augustine.

Good old grandfather Saint Augustine made lots of mistakes in his life, and in his thinking, but he got a lot of things about God right. For instance, he knew God was unknowable. Try as he might to explain God -and we all try to explain God""Augustine knew that God was ultimately unknowable.

"God is greater and truer in our thoughts than in our words; God is greater and truer in reality than in our thoughts." Augustine, On the Trinity, VII.4.7.

One of Augustine's great theological ancestors was the Swiss thinker Karl Barth, some of whose work I read this week. Barth is a thick thinker. I might not want a volume of Barth's work beside my hospital bed either. Then again, I might.

Someone once asked Barth if he could sum up the entire Christian message, and the entire expanse of his work. Karl Barth, who was writing his massive systematic work on the nature of God, said simply, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." It was perfect. Later, in his more academic mode, still close to perfect, he said that God is the One who loves in freedom.

"God lives His perfect life in the abundance of many individual and distinct perfections. Each of these is perfect in itself and in combination with all the others. For whether it is a form of love in which God is free, or a form of freedom in which God loves, it is nothing else but God Himself, His one, simple, distinctive being." (Church Dogmatics, Volume II, Part I, Chapter VI, para 29), (page 322).

I remember when I was in the hospital, way back in the second grade. I had scarlet fever, which was dangerous back in the 1960's. I remember, after sleepless nights with fever and confusion, I remember one day when the fever broke, and I tasted ice cream again. I don't know if it was Neapolitan Ice Cream or not, but it sure was divine.

That ice cream was the sign that someone loved me. That ice cream was the sign that I was part of a larger family of love, and that larger family of love had won. It was a family of mother and father, to be sure. But it was also a family of friends who brought prayers and presents, doctors and nurses, scientists who had worked laboriously on the miracle of penicillin, confectioners who knew how to mix ice cream, folks I knew well, and folks I had no knowledge of whatsoever. They were all part of a family of love.

This is what the Christian Church is, too. This is what the Christian Church is when we tell the story of God in the Nicene Creed each week. This creed is not the exact words of what was written back in 325 AD. They are not the exact words of what we written in 381.

But those folks were part of our Christian family, struggling to express in word and attitude just who God is. Their struggle, and their journey, is part of our family struggle now.

God was bigger than they could imagine or know. God is still bigger than we can imagine or know. But God's transcendence does not defeat or discourage us. Instead, God's transcendence wins us over and encourages us. We want to be part of this family of God, growing larger and larger in self-expression.

We celebrate today a family holiday. The family holiday is that God loves us. We cannot explain why God loves us, but we confirm it every day of our lives. We tell stories about God's love when we come together. We talk about Father, and Mother, and creation. We talk about Jesus, and Son and child redeemer. We talk about Spirit, and breath and wind, and sanctifier. They are all expressions of the perfect love of God.

We serve each other bread and wine in remembrance. Let's serve each other some ice cream, too. Taste and see that the Lord is good. Taste and see that God loves you, and God loves me. God loves all of us, together.

AMEN.

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