
Why the Trinity?

A sermon by Canon Wallace Marsh
Trinity Sunday – Year A

In the name of the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I have been asked this question more than once. It happens at the same place and time.

I go home to visit my family in Tennessee, and I have inevitably left something back in Atlanta, or I need something for the next day. At that point, it's 10 p.m. and I decide to make a Walmart run. (A late evening Walmart run in rural Tennessee is its own experience).

So, I go in after my item. I find it and run to the checkout line. Of course, there are 25 checkout lanes, but only two of them are open at 10 p.m. And guess what? Everyone else in my hometown has decided to shop at 10 p.m., so there is quite the wait.

I wait...and wait...and wait...and then I feel this tap on my shoulder, and I turn around and they ask the question: "Have you been saved?"

Of course, I tell them that I have been baptized, which leads to another question: "Where do you go to church?" Then, I spend the rest of my time in the line explaining that Episcopalians are actually Christian. By that time, I have gotten through the checkout line and am headed to my car.

All things aside, I can't help but wonder on this Trinity Sunday what St. Patrick, the author of that long opening hymn, would have said to that individual. Would St. Patrick have turned around and showed him the words on that breastplate? (Maybe it's not a breastplate in today's world; maybe it's a tattoo). The words read, "I bind unto myself today the strong name of the Trinity."

Why was it so important for Patrick to bind to himself the Trinity? Why is it so important for us to bind ourselves to the Trinity?

When we bind ourselves to the Trinity we affirm two things about God. First, God is a God of revelation, one who reveals God's self in our lives. And second, God is a God of relationship.

First, God is a God of revelation.

There are two German theologians that go toe-to-toe when it comes to the Trinity. Standing in one corner is the 19th century theologian Frederick Schleiermacher, and standing in the other corner is the 20th century theologian, Karl Barth.

Schleiermacher's take is that when somebody becomes a Christian, once they grow in their faith, we then introduce the Trinity. It's not something you begin with. It's something you end with. Schleiermacher says the Trinity is like a "coping stone." If you're familiar with architecture, you know the coping stone is the stone that is on top and keeps the water out. It is the last thing added to a structure. Schleiermacher says that's what the Trinity should be—the last thing, an appendix,

something that helps us resolve the questions we can't fully resolve.

Karl Barth is in complete opposition. Barth believes that we should begin with the Trinity, because the Trinity is about revelation. It is about God's revelation in our life. If you have studied the theology of Karl Barth, you know that he wrote a lot, but was able to reduce the Trinity to three sentences. (That in and of itself is a miracle).

Those sentences go like this: God reveals. God reveals God's self through God's self. God reveals.

First, God reveals through creation and to Moses in the burning bush. Second, God reveals God's self through God self in the person of Jesus Christ. Christ on the cross is the fullest self-revelation of God. Finally, God reveals in the Holy Spirit.

It's about revelation. It's about God revealing God's self in our lives. We all know this to be true in our own lives. Whether it be in circumstances, events, or people, we have all experienced God's revelation in our lives. I can think of many moments in my own life, and I'll share one with you today.

About 10 years ago, I was a priest in South Georgia. I remember going to an event and meeting a very young attractive woman. We had a lot in common. We went to the same college (although I was six years her elder) and had a lot of mutual friends.

A couple of days after we met, I asked her for her number so I could take her out on a date. When Margaret Ann gave me her phone number I was taken back. Why? Well, the last five digits of her phone number (558-0478) were my birthday, 8/04/78. Now, some would say "that's just coincidence," or "pure happenstance," but as a person of faith, I saw it as revelation, as God revealing something holy and special.

But, what happens when God's revelation isn't always so clear? Where is God's revelation when someone we love dies, or when there is sickness, struggles, or depression? How does God reveal God's self in those moments?

I've spent a lot of time talking with people experiencing difficulty, and the more they talk, the more they discover God's presence even in those dark moments. They will often describe it as a light in the midst of the darkness. That is how God reveals God's self in those moments. It is similar to the words in John's gospel, "in him was light, and the light was the light of the world, and the darkness did not overcome it." God reveals God's self to us throughout our lives!

Second, God is a God of relationship.

When we bind ourselves to the Trinity, we bind ourselves to a God that is deeply relational, present in all of our relationships.

About five years ago, I took a trip with a group of people to go study the theology of St. John of the Cross, the great Spanish mystic and theologian. We were in Avila reading his writing, listening to lecture, and going to see places where St. John of the Cross once lived.

I remember traveling to one of those places and going into an art museum. In that museum there was a painting that had a huge impact on my life. The painting was by a Spanish artist named, Geranimo Ezquerro, and the title of the painting was "Holy Trinity."

It was an image of God the Father in heaven, the Spirit as a dove between heaven and earth, and the Son as a young child. On either side of the Son were his parents, Mary and Joseph. Since the painting was titled Holy Trinity, it made you wonder which Trinity they were talking about, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or the Holy Family.

I was moved by that painting because Margaret Ann was only a few months pregnant, and I was about to be a father. Seeing the Son as a young child was a reminder that God was about to enter my life in a new relationship. Yet, it was also a reminder that God enters our life in all of our relationships.

I used to think that being in relationship with God meant that you go off somewhere to encounter God. I used to believe that you had to go off to the mountain, or have a mountaintop experience, but that painting reminded me God is present in all of our relationships. Whether it be the relationships we have inside our homes, to the relationships we have with our family and friends, to the relationships we have with our colleagues at work. God is in our relationships!

Now, what happens when those relationships are strained or become difficult? Where is God in the conflict?

When we bind ourselves to the Trinity, we bind ourselves to an understanding of unity, but also diversity.

There are times in our lives when we are in conflict, when there are differences of opinions, and disagreements. Even in those times we are called to be in relationship with others, to not villainize those who disagree with us, but to be in relationship and understand their different perspectives and positions.

When the Episcopal Church is at its best, model what that looks like. We say there is something that hold us together, even though we disagree about other things. We can disagree while still maintaining our relationship with one another.

Imagine what our political arena would look like if we could stay in relationship while crossing the other side of the aisle and recognizing the holiness of that person. That is what happens when we bind ourselves to the Trinity—we see God in all our relationships.

So, on this Trinity Sunday, we bind ourselves to the Trinity, but we also realized that God has bound God's self to us. We celebrate that we are bound to God and God is bound to us, because God will continue to reveal God's presence in our live, and God will continue to be present in our relationships.

Today, we give God the glory, the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.