

HOW WE ARE

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Dr. Anne Gavin Ritchie on May 30, 2010,
Trinity Sunday, based on Proverbs 8:1-4 and St. John 16:12-15.*

Today is the only Sunday in the Church year that we commemorate not an event, but a doctrine. And a pretty difficult doctrine at that: God as Trinity. A unity of being, comprised of three distinct “persons”: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Trinity Sunday made the Church calendar only in the year 1334, as an attempt to further unify different understandings of God. I can imagine how challenging it must have been to the first followers of Jesus, all devout monotheists, as they sought to comprehend the role and meaning of Jesus.

Jesus was a man, as human as any of us. Jesus laughed and cried and wondered and grieved, just like we do. After the experience of Resurrection, Jesus began to be identified *with* God. The disciples began to realize that if they wanted to know what God is like, all they had to do was look at Jesus. And not only look at him, listen to his words. And pay attention to the way Jesus lived his life. *That’s* what God is. *That’s who* God is.

Last Sunday we focused on the coming of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. By the way, this doesn’t mean the Spirit comes *after* the Father and the Son. The first book of Genesis tells us that the Spirit “moved over the waters of the deep,” as an agent of creation.

Today’s passage from Proverbs personifies the Spirit as Wisdom, and as female. Wisdom, *sophia* in Greek, also takes an active role in the creation of all things. But John’s Gospel has Christ, the Word, being the same kind of creative agent. Perhaps these all are related? Which would mean the feminine is an active and inseparable part of the being of God.

Over the years people have experimented with ways of expressing the Trinity. Some call God “Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer... or, as I prefer, Spirit as “Companion.” Others, using an agricultural model, call God the Root of the plant, the Flower and the Fragrance. My personal favorite is God as the Lover, the Beloved and the Love.

But these days, with the likes of self-avowed atheists like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, it’s important for us to be very clear about why we talk about God at all. As Virginia Seminary Dean Ian Markham points out in his new book *Against Atheism*, these two and other contemporary atheists reject a simplistic and distorted god. The irony is that the god they reject I reject, too: I reject a god who is controlling, jealous and vindictive. Without doing any truly scholarly study of the Bible, they create a kind of cartoon god and then dismiss it out of hand.

There is much of their critique that I understand and, in fact, agree with. And I think Jesus would, too! God is not here to condemn us, as in “Do what I tell you or I’ll send you to hell!” God takes no pleasure in human misfortune. God takes no pleasure in human mistakes. Unfortunately, the concept of God inflicting everlasting punishment seems well-entrenched in our collective psyche. Almost every day there is at least one comic strip reflecting that theme:

two characters stand at the golden gates, with St. Peter eyeing them suspiciously and finding a good reason why they can't pass through to heaven. Or figures are being tormented in hell.

I don't think or believe or feel that God is like that. The God I know and worship is *desperate* for our well-being. In fact, the God *I* know and worship cares more about our welfare than *we* do. The God I know and worship is willing to wait forever until *we* make the choice to come to Him. Or to Her. He/She has all the time in the world to wait for us. And after that, even more.

Another problem I know I face is the immutable image of God the Father as the Old Man, with flowing white beard in the sky. Blame it on Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling. It's hard to get the image out of our heads. But it is *so* incomplete. There are so many other wonderful images for God in the Scriptures, though not as compellingly depicted: God as Bridegroom, Bride, Rock, Shepherd, Song, Love. One tremendous value of Trinity is to remind us not to be so quick in describing God. Any category we can come up with is immediately superseded by another. Then another... and so on.

To me, the most essential reason to think about God is to remember who *we* are. One of the two creation stories makes it clear that we, both males and females, are created in the image of God. This means that we are, in our own *being*, designed to be *part* of God, to *participate* in, God.

One of my favorite collects, or prayers, begins like this: "O God, in whom we live and move and have our being..." This presents a completely different understanding of God. God is not some distant, overarching, separate being. We are *in* God, which means God is in *us*. It's as if we are human fish, swimming in the divine sea.

Which means we need to *be who we are*, which is, dare I say it, of God. We need to incarnate – just like Jesus – the God in whom we exist. That's a tall order, but a necessary one. So what does that mean?

There's a wonderful story I've told several times over the years. It's a story I know *I* need to remember for my soul's sake...

"Once there was an old and very wise man. Every day he would sit outside a gas station in his rocking chair and wait to greet motorists as they passed through his small town. On this day, his granddaughter was there to pass the time with him.

"As they sat and watched the people come and go, a tall man who surely had to be a tourist – since they knew everyone in the town – began looking around as if he were checking out the area for a place to live. The stranger walked up and asked, 'So what kind of town is this that we're in?' The older gentleman slowly turned to the man and asked, 'Well, what kind of town are you from?' The visitor answered, 'In the town I'm from everyone is very critical of each other. The neighbors all gossip about everyone, and it's a real negative place to live. I'm

glad to be leaving.’ The man in the chair looked at the stranger and said, ‘You know, that’s just how this town is.’

An hour or so later a family that was also passing through stopped for gas. The car slowly turned in and rolled to a stop where the older gentleman and his granddaughter were sitting. The mother jumped out with two small children and asked where the restrooms were. The father stepped out of the car and asked the man, ‘Is this town a pretty good place to live?’ The man in the chair replied, ‘What about the town you’re from?’ The father looked at him and said, ‘Well, in the town I’m from everyone is close and always willing to lend their neighbor a helping hand. There’s always a hello and thank you wherever you go. I really hate to leave. I feel almost like we are leaving family.’ The older gentleman turned to the father and gave him a warm smile. “You know, that’s a lot like this small town.’ Then the family returned to the car, waved goodbye and drove away.

After the family was in the distance, the granddaughter looked up at her grandfather and asked, ‘Grandpa, how come when the first man came into our town you told him it was a terrible place to live and when the family came into town you told them it was a wonderful place to live?’ The grandfather lovingly looked down at his granddaughter and said, ‘No matter where you move, you take yourself with you. *That’s* what makes it terrible or wonderful.’”

I suppose *I* would add, “No matter where you go, you take your God with you.” If your God is petty and vindictive and judgmental, so *you* will be. If your God is expansive and loving and forgiving, so *you* will be.

This whole idea of the Trinity, so impossible to understand rationally, may be a call to us to understand God in other, deeper ways, perhaps and foremost, with our hearts. I really don’t believe that God cares if we comprehend the doctrine of the Trinity. But I believe that God cares *very* much how we treat each other and ourselves.

Maybe the chief lesson of this Trinity Sunday is to be humble about our ability to *comprehend* God, and *ambitious* in our willingness to *live God’s love*. Because that’s who we *are*.