

Trinity Sunday
June 7, 2009

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

One of my favorite comedians is author and frequent NPR contributor, David Sedaris. Several years ago I read his book, "Me Talk Pretty One Day," and found myself barely able to get through the story of his experiences taking a French class while living in Paris. Tears of laughter fell down my face.

From his description it didn't sound like his classmates, comprised of people from around the world, were getting very far mastering the language. Listen to his description of his classmates trying to talk in French about the Easter Holiday (and please be merciful and generous in your thoughts towards these students, remembering your own struggles trying to learn another language):

"The teacher then called upon the rest of us to explain [the Easter Holiday].

The [Polish students] led the charge to the best of their ability. "It is," said one, "a party for the little boy of God who call his self Jesus and . . . [um]."

She faltered, and her fellow countryman came to her aid.

"He call his self Jesus, and then he be die one day on two . . . morsels of . . . lumber."

The rest of the class jumped in, offering bits of information that would have given the pope an aneurysm.

"He die one day, and then he go above of my head to live with your father."

"He weared the long hair, and after he died, the first day he come back here for to say hello to the peoples."

"Part of the problem," writes Sedaris, "had to do with grammar. Simple nouns such as cross and resurrection were beyond our grasp, let alone such complicated reflexive phrases as "To give of yourself your only begotten son." Faced with the challenge of explaining the cornerstone of Christianity, we did what any self-respecting group of people might do. We talked about food instead."

I thought about this story last week when talking to David about his sermon on Pentecost. I didn't know that I would be able to fit it into my sermon, but I do want to continue to take-on the theme of translation – at least initially - as I am finding similar challenges preaching about the Trinity.

I've taken several Spanish classes (and for those of you who were in church to hear my last sermon, the Spanish classes go about as well as the piano lessons).

I can imagine a scene, similar to the one described by Sedaris, playing out in one of my Spanish classes if the teacher had asked us to explain the Trinity. I would likely do no better than those in the French class in Paris. The trinity is, you know, el hombre, el chico, el pajarito.

But, what self respecting seraphim would sing “Holy Holy Holy” to the God best described as the Man, the Boy, and the Bird?

None - because they sing in praise of a mysterious love.

Determined and well-intentioned Christians have attempted to describe the mystery of the Trinity for generations. The task is made difficult, in part, because the doctrine itself is not Biblical – you cannot find explanations of the Trinity in Scripture. There are, of course, passages that people believe point to the doctrine: the reading from Isaiah being one of these instances where “the Lord” is referred to in the singular and in the plural:

The voice of the Lord says, Whom shall *I* send, and who will go for *us*?

Though not explicitly Scriptural, the doctrine of the Trinity developed in early Christianity as people came together to try to understand and articulate to others what had been revealed to them about their God.

Now we have people who attempt to understand what other Christians meant when they attempted to understand their God. There are thus layers of well intentioned confusion regarding the Trinity.

Most attempts to describe the Trinity usually end up really intellectual and complicated or oversimplified, if not entirely misleading.

My first memory of learning about the Trinity was of a children’s book relating the Holy and Undivided Trinity to ...an apple. You have the skin, the flesh and the core – but it is still one apple. I have heard others talk about a braided bracelet – three strands, but one bracelet. These descriptions are only slightly better than “the man, the boy and the bird.”

What does that tell us about the human endeavor to try to figure out, name and explain this doctrine?

For one, I think explanations that do not acknowledge the mystery of the God we worship today domesticate and remove all power from the mystery.

So, then, what is a preacher to do? What is a Christian to do when asked by another to explain the Trinity, to explain how God is three persons and yet one God, one substance?

Augustine expressed the difficulty this way: He said, “When it is asked three what, then the great poverty from which our language suffers becomes apparent. But the formula three persons was coined, not in order to give a complete explanation by means of it, but in order that we might not be obliged to remain silent.”

Freed from the constraints of our language through the “three persons, one substance” construction, why then are we so often still silent??

I know, for me, it is because I can get caught up trying to intellectualize the problem, rather than speak about the experience of the Trinity, or experiences of personhood and community.

I ask, like Nicodemus, "How can these things be?"

I hear Jesus' response: "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

Right you are Jesus: I do not understand. Not completely. I cannot begin to understand with my intellect alone.

I do know how I experience personhood and how I experience relationship. I come to know who I am through my friendships, through loving others and being loved. I know these things in my heart. I feel who I am and I feel this in my heart – the pain, the joy, the hurt, the forgiveness, the growth.

I call on you, God, to meet me there, in my heart. There, the mystery of my full personhood meets yours. There you dwell in me and invite me to do likewise.

Together we dance in the mystery of love.

Have you ever seen two lovers float across a dance floor? It is as if they are one person, they are so in sync with each other.

Many have described the Trinity in this way – as a lover's dance, where the lovers remain distinct but become one.

Scholars use a fancy Greek term to describe the mutual indwelling of love among the persons of the Trinity: Perichoresis.

This is a well-known term and description of the Trinity in theological circles.

However, recognizing the danger in peppering one's sermons with theologically loaded terms in a foreign language, one blogger from New Jersey writes: "I sometimes wonder if people think it refers to a skin condition – 'Do you have persistent perichoresis? Try Gold Bond Medicated Powder.'" (F. Scott Petersen)

I don't want you all to get lost in the foreign terminology. For perichoresis is a beautiful concept which in Greek means "to move around."

Like a dance.

Theologian Catherine LaCugna writes, “In interaction and inter-course, the dancers and the observers experience one fluid motion of encircling, encompassing, permeating, enveloping, outstretching (God for Us p 272).”

Imagine the three persons of the Trinity in this dance, each one fully distinct but also fully held within the other, The Father in the Son, the Son in the Spirit, the Spirit in the Father. Now the dance moves beyond the God head. The outstretching arms of God reach out to you and invite you into the dance.

What has been revealed to Christians throughout the centuries is that we are partners in this dance.

La Cugna continues “Perichoresis, embodied in inclusiveness, community and freedom, is the ‘form of life’ for God and the ideal of human beings whose communion with each other reflects the life of the Trinity (God for Us p 273).”

Can our lives, our relationships, our communion really reflect the life of God? This perfect love, perfect freedom, perfect humility?

We know we are not God.

Yet we also know we are made in God’s image.

We know we are not going to be able to love perfectly, be perfectly humble, and always, in our freedom, choose the good.

Yet, as Christians we are called to embrace and give an account of the hope that is in us; we are called to a certain level of idealness.

Therefore, can we think about our relationships, our communities, our churches as reflecting the life of the Trinity? Can we experience the Trinity in that way?

What would this expression of Christian idealism require? In his book, *These Three are One*, David Cunningham writes, “If we express a desire to ‘be in communion with’ others, this will certainly require spending time with them and sharing mutual interests. But it also requires something more: it means that we must be willing to allow others to shape our lives in profound and fundamental ways (167).”

Do we let go of ourselves enough to let others shape us? Do we let others participate in our lives to such an extent that our relationships with others shape who we are as persons in a fundamental way?

Does thinking about the Trinity as three persons who permeate each other, participate in each other’s lives to such an extent that they are one help us at all think about the lives we live today among all of creation – among the annoying co-workers, the aggressive drivers, the slow people

in the line ahead of us at the grocery store, the high maintenance friend, the disobedient child, the angry parent.

Does thinking about the Trinity in this way “help us begin to think about what it might mean to dwell in, and be indwelt by, the lives of others (165),” as Cunningham asks us?

Think of the people you work with on a daily basis. Think of the people in this church, who you may encounter only weekly, if that.

Do we let them penetrate the walls we put up to protect ourselves?

The trinity is an expression of real vulnerability and real love. We are called to reflect that in our lives, not perfectly, but as best we can.

And we don't simply look upon the trinity as a model. We draw upon the Trinity, the God that dwells within us, goes before us, invites us not only to merely “have a relationship” with God, but far more intimately, to become participants ourselves in the divine relationship, the Trinity (Mark McIntosh, *Mysteries of Faith*, p 37).”

As Augustine said, “When it is asked three what, then the great poverty from which our language suffers becomes apparent. But the formula three persons was coined, not in order to give a complete explanation by means of it, but in order that we might not be obliged to remain silent.”

For, in the midst of such an invitation from our God, in the midst of such love, in the midst of the dance, in the midst of the call to be better neighbors, lovers and friends, we cannot be silent. We must speak, even if all we can do by way of beginning is to join with the seraphim and sing Holy Holy Holy is our Lord.

Amen.