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Psalm 8, John 16:12-15
May 30, 2010

I know I've shared with you before some of the trials and tribulations of my time at Duke Divinity School – being one of the oldest students at 42, breaking my hip and having to be pushed around in a wheelchair. That'll make you feel young. Trying to learn how to read and write theologically and make friends with classmates who say things like, "Wow! You're old enough to be my mother!" But one of the hardest things I think for anyone who goes to seminary is what can happen to your faith. The Bible, which had been for you a source of strength and spiritual wisdom, becomes a textbook to be dissected and questioned. The tenets of your faith are litmus-tested against centuries of "correct" doctrinal musings. Even worship can take on an intellectually superior aura that leaves little room for the Spirit to move and inspire.

Knowing all that, you can see why I wasn't excited when I found out I'd be preaching on the Trinity today. The word Trinity doesn't even appear in the Bible! It didn't come into use until the year 325 A.D. at something called the Council of Nicaea. That was the first ecumenical council, where questions on the "nature" of Jesus were discussed. As one commentator puts it, "This one day out of the year we're called to ponder a teaching of the Church rather than a teaching of Jesus." Now I ask you, who wants to preach on a dull, dry doctrine when you could preach on Jesus healing a blind man? I think I tried at least three times in the last week to get Dr. Howell to take my place here this morning – but he wouldn't bite.

It would be easy to become cynical about a bunch of old men sitting around coming up with yet another dogmatic belief to be professed. But the truth is it was the early believers, the first church members who pushed for the discussion because they were struggling to put their experience of God into words. You see, for them, the presence of God in their lives was revealed in three distinct relationships with God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. God in three persons, and yet all God. They wanted to understand who God is and know God so intimately that they finally handed this difficult belief over to the theologians hoping they could make it more intelligible. It's human nature to want to know all we can about someone. To try and discover the very "being" of those with whom we're in relationship. Why do you think so many people are tuned into this phenomenon of social media? We flock to reality shows that reveal people's inmost secrets. We seem to crave hearing the most intimate details of the lives of family and friends. Personally, I have no desire to join Facebook. I know I'm one of the last five people in the world who hasn't! But I can't really see the purpose of being updated hourly on what my neighbor had for lunch or who their favorite celebrity is. But somehow we think if we can gather enough personal knowledge we can fully know another.

Our Jewish ancestors didn't share this assumption, at least about God. They didn't believe one could ever completely know who God is. They resisted using language that said God is "fill in the blank." It was forbidden to make images of God or even speak God's name aloud. Read the Old Testament and you'll see they preferred to use metaphors, declaring that "God is like" a mighty warrior, or a mother hen, something

they could relate to. All the time knowing they would never come close to explaining God. I think they had it right. Our understanding of God and how God acts in the world will always be limited by the small body of knowledge we humans can conceive. The Psalmist writes, “When I look at the heavens, the work of thy fingers, what is man that thou art mindful of him?” In other words, it’s all a mystery to us. And not being able to explain everything is actually OK. Logic and reason will only take us so far. Maybe one of the gifts the Trinity offers us is humility in the face of God’s incomprehensibility.

But what we are able to glean from this mystery is that it has something to do with relationships. Yeah, yeah – you say – we get it. We know all about relationships – you and I participate in dozens of them every day, parent-child, wife-husband, boss-employee, neighbor, friend. Big deal. But the big deal is precisely that God is in relationship in a way that you and I are not. Or better yet, God is in relationship in the way we were intended to be and still could be. The relationship of the three members of the Trinity is not only a relationship of equals, three distinct persons sharing themselves fully, but also a relationship of complete and free interdependence with one another.

I read a fascinating article this week by a man named David Lose. He says we live in a world that is incredibly binary. We tend to see the world in pairs. He gives the example of the birth of a third child into the family. “The third child isn’t just one more than two, it’s a whole new sibling equation,” he writes. “Two can play on a see-saw, the third demands a whole new game.” Every day you and I use pairs to distinguish ourselves and describe our world. Yes-no, up-down, hot-cold, young-old, good-bad. This works well for learning contrasts, where each member of the pair defines themselves **over and against the other**. I know who I am by knowing who I’m not. But it also introduces the dangerous element of power. Think of the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden. The temptation in Eden was to eat from the tree of knowledge and therefore be able to know the difference between good and evil. To be able to discriminate between the two is to wield power through our own definition and take our position on one side or the other. How often in our world do we divide into oppositional pairs: Black/white, rich/poor, educated/illiterate? We can only do that if we take God out of the equation. Our two ancestors wanted their independence from God and ended up in a place where they could only define themselves by being in opposition with each other rather than relationship. Adam blames Eve and Eve blames the serpent and thus began the history of the world.

But the Trinity is not like that. The three members do not define themselves over and against each other – but rather they are defined in, with and through each other. Maybe that’s why it’s such a mystery to us. Equal and interdependent. The Father isn’t defined as **not** the Son or **not** the Spirit. And even more radically, God the Father can’t fully be Father apart from the Son and Spirit. It’s the Son and Spirit that give context for and make sense of the Father. That’s a very different kind of relationship than those that govern our world.

Many of you may have read a recent bestseller that has done more to get people talking about the Trinity than all the ancient writings of the church Fathers. In the book, *The Shack*, author William Young goes for what I call the shock-and-awe casting of the Holy Trinity. God is portrayed as a large African American woman; Jesus is a blue collar man with Middle Eastern looks, and the Holy Spirit is a “distinctively Asian woman.” They all live together in the shack, preparing meals, growing gardens and doing a little carpentry work on the side. This celebration of diversity in the Godhead could be a whole

other sermon, but the question that the protagonist asks about halfway through the book goes to the heart of our confusion about the Trinity. He asks the three of them, “Who’s in charge? Don’t you have a chain of command?” To which they reply, “We have no concept of final authority among us, only unity. We are in a circle of relationship, not a chain of command. What you’re seeing here is relationship without any overlay of power. We don’t need power over the other because we are always looking out for the best. Hierarchy would make no sense among us. Actually this is your problem, not ours.”

In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells his disciples, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore he will take what is mine and declare it to you.” “This is the language of shared love,” writes 12th century scholar Richard St. Vincent, “a community in which that love is expansive and generous. It is a love that cannot be self contained, but overflows from Father to Son to Spirit and back again in a graceful, dynamic and deeply intimate dance.”

You and I were baptized with water into this grace-filled dance, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Later this morning we will gather around the table and name the Trinity as we pray, “Through your Son Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit in your holy church, all honor and glory is yours almighty Father, now and forever.” So maybe I was wrong. Maybe rather than being some esoteric, intellectually derived concept, the Trinity can teach us something. In it we can glimpse the possibility of hope for our broken, one-upmanship, over-and-against relationships we have with one another. We might find we don’t need to use power over others because we’re always looking out for the best. We might even find that hierarchy no longer makes sense to us either. Maybe the reason we don’t get excited about a doctrine like the Trinity is because we’ve made it into something we merely profess with our mouths as we face the altar, rather than a part of our faith we confess with our very lives?

On this and every Memorial Day weekend, I always think about my father and the men he served with in the Korean War. Like most veterans, my dad doesn’t talk much about his time in the Army. He was drafted in 1950 and became part of Company L of the 45th division. The 190 men stayed together through basic training and then 9 months of combat duty in Korea. If you met my father, you would see a quiet, kind, gentle man who rarely raises his voice. It’s almost impossible to imagine him in fatigues, jostling in the back of a truck and learning to fire a gun. As he tells it, he was quite fortunate one day when the commanding officer asked for a volunteer who knew how to type. My dad, who had just finished his degree at Mercer University, tentatively raised his hand, not knowing what he was volunteering for. From then on he became what my sisters and I call “the Radar” of his company, if you remember the company clerk character from the TV show MASH. He had the little round glasses and everything!

As this weekend approached, I asked my dad to tell me about some of the guys in his outfit. He said, “It’s hard to describe. It’s not like brothers, it’s something more. With brothers, there’s common ground. You’re raised by the same people, going to the same schools, having many of the same experiences. But here you’re placed in life-and-death situations with men you would never even have met back in the states. Different values, different religions, different hopes and dreams. And yet there’s a bond that can’t be broken.” Many of the men my dad started with didn’t make it home. He talks about his

best friend who stopped by one day for what would be their last conversation. His friend said, "I don't think I'm going to make it through." Within a month, he was brought down by a bullet on the front line. When my dad returned to the states, he went to see his friend's parents here in North Carolina and told them about the last days of their amazing son and the friendship they had shared. That was in 1952. In 1986, the men of Company L began getting together once a year for a reunion with their families. They've been doing that now for the last 24 years. When they get together, they very rarely talk about the war. They talk about their lives: Their retirement, their community work, their grandchildren. And they always set aside a time to honor and remember the men who are no longer here, whose number grows with each passing year. Dad ended our conversation by saying, "We were together for such a short time but it's a relationship that never ended and never will."

In the end, it's all still a mystery, isn't it? Relationships, love, the Trinity? Someone once said, "To believe something means to act as if it is so." To act as if it is so... Maybe if we could begin to act as if the Trinity is so – work toward making all of our relationships like that of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, then maybe we could believe it's true. In the end, to believe in the Trinity is to live into the story of God's love: undivided, unconditional, and completely unfathomable. God in three persons, blessed Trinity. Amen.