

Sunday, February 5, 2012
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit”

Today I want to explore one of the most beloved and least understood beliefs of our faith.

I want to talk about the Trinity – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

At a recent conference I attended the speaker challenged the audience, which was primarily made up of clergy, to think about how we characterize the Trinity in our worship.

One eager respondent said, “I use the image of water, you know, ice, vapor and liquid.”

We all winced.

Really, Jesus as an ice cube?

I can’t, however, be too quick to judge when we take a look at some of the explanations that have been provided by the great theologians over time.

There are only two specific references to the Trinity in scripture.

At the end of Matthew’s gospel post-Easter Jesus tells his disciples to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

Later, Paul concludes his 2nd letter to the church at Corinth with these words: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.”

Rather than being scripturally defined, the Doctrine of the Trinity emerged over time as an explanation of the pattern of divine activity revealed in Scripture and lived in Christian experience.

Writing at the end of the first century, Irenaeus described the distinct yet related roles of Father, Son and Spirit:

God the Father uncreated, who is uncontained, invisible, one God, creator of the universe;

Word of God, the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who in the fullness of time, in order to gather all things to himself, he became a human being amongst human beings capable of being seen and touched, to destroy death, bring life, and restore fellowship between God and humanity;

and the Holy Spirit who, in the fullness of time, was poured out in a new way on our human nature in order to renew humanity throughout the entire world in the sight of God.”

It started getting more complicated around the third century when theologian, Tertullian, invented the word “Trinity” and wrote about God as “three persons, one substance.”

He argued that substance is what unites the three aspects of the trinity and person is what distinguishes them.

Then in the year 312, Constantine won control of the Roman Empire.

Attributing his victory to the intervention of Jesus Christ, he elevated Christianity to favored status in the empire.

His motto was "One God, one Lord, one faith, one church, one empire, one emperor."

The new emperor soon discovered, however, that "one faith and one church" were fractured by theological disputes, especially conflicting understandings of the nature of Christ.

At that time, Arius, a priest of the church in Alexandria, asserted that "God created the divine Christ, the Word through whom all things have their existence, before the beginning of time."

Therefore, he argued, "the divinity of Christ was **similar** to the divinity of God, but not of the same essence."

The bishop, Alexander, together with his associate and successor, Athanasius, opposed Arius.

They asserted that "the divinity of Christ, the Son, is of the **same** substance as the divinity of God, the Father."

To hold otherwise, they said, was to open the possibility of polytheism-worshipping multiple Gods, and to imply that knowledge of God in Christ was not final knowledge of God.

To counter a widening rift within the church, Constantine convened a council in Nicaea in 325.

A creed reflecting the position of Alexander and Athanasius was written and signed by a majority of the bishops.

Nevertheless, the two parties continued to battle each other.

In 381, a second council met in Constantinople.

A revised and expanded form of the 325 creed was adopted.

We know this as the Nicene Creed, which remains in our prayer books today (page 512).

By the fifth century Augustine was arguing that the action of the entire Trinity is to be discerned behind the actions of each of its persons.

He argued that humanity is not merely created in the image of God, but in the image of the Trinity.

Augustine believed "If the height of God's creation is man then we should look for God in humanity."

He believed all three persons of the Trinity to be equal in eternity.

Augustine's most distinctive approach to the Trinity was his development of "psychological analogies," which identified the mind as the place to understand the Trinitarian nature of God.

The theological arguments continued throughout the ages.

The ninth century brought the *Filioque* Controversy.

This was a debate on whether the Holy Spirit emanated from the Father or the Father and the Son.

Filioque is Latin for "and from the Son."

This debate split the churches in the East (from the Father alone) from those in the West (from the Father and the Son).

Jonathan Edwards, writing in the early 19th century argued the Creator was a ‘personal acting God’ - a trinity, a social being of interrelated persons.

He wrote “The very end for which this supremely social being created the universe was the communication of happiness to his creatures.”

In recent times, the exploration of the Trinity has continued with Karl Barth claiming that “God reveals himself through himself.”

Karl Rahner posits, “the immanent Trinity can therefore be thought of as a systematic conception of the economic trinity.”

No wonder my colleague defaulted to the ice cube illustration.

How on earth are we to understand what these learned men are talking about.

Let me try to unravel some of this for you.

The Trinity is simply the way that you experience God.

It is not necessarily exactly the same for every person.

Sometimes we see the magnitude of God in nature, in the beauty of a mountain.

Sometimes we see the wonder of creation in the eyes of a baby.

Sometimes we feel the gentle nudge in a certain direction.

God created.

God breathed life into us.

Only human beings were created in God’s image and brought to life with God’s breath.

God interacted with human beings through the ages in a variety of ways breathing inspiration and vision to prophets and leaders. We didn’t listen-we turned away from God.

God sent his son, in the person of Jesus Christ, to live among us; to teach us how to live into our created beings;

to learn how to live in the image of God;

Our gospel reading today is a perfect example of Jesus showing us the possibilities and potential for living in God’s kingdom.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted.

Blessed are you.

God’s breath continues to bring us to life – new life in the Holy Spirit.

The Greek word for spirit is pneuma, breath.

Each breath you take is a gift from God.

With each breath come new possibilities, new life.

Breathe deeply and know that you are of God.

May the blessings of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be upon you this day and forevermore. Amen.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, creator of all we call upon you this day to grant us the grace to understand the many ways that you reveal yourself to us.

Help us to grasp the beauty of creation, the wonder of humanity and the essence of your Spirit.

Help us to live with mystery and paradox – knowing that you are beyond our understanding.

Hear us this day as we turn to you seeking prayers of comfort and healing for those whom we love.

We pray for Alvord, Don, Gloria, Dick,

May they feel your gentle care.

We celebrate with joy those who have entered into covenant with us today. We thank you for bringing Anne, Tim, Martin, Rose, Scott, Judith, and Christelle into our community.

May they find peace among us.

We pray this day for our brothers and sisters in the world who live with poverty, hunger or fear.

May their lives be blessed with your presence.

O God, we turn to you now, with the prayers of our hearts, knowing that you hear our every breath.

Jesus taught them to pray in these words...Our Father