



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

The Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Rector

Limitless Imagination

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, May 26, 2013

The First Sunday after Pentecost: Trinity Sunday

Based on John 16:12-15

On Tuesday evening our parish gathered for the Celebration of a New Ministry. It was a packed house event that will go down in my personal history as one of the most unforgettable and inspiring moments of my entire life. It was filled with good will and hope, with people wishing the best for and believing the best of one another and imagining what we, as a group of people on a journey to God, might truly be able to become. After all of that, I thought I could preach for days about anything but was surprisingly and quite quickly brought back to earth when I remembered that today is Trinity Sunday and that I don't know a bit more about the Trinity or have any greater understanding of it now than I ever have! It is not that I am not a Trinitarian; I **am** one; check that box. It does, however, mean that I am not sure what it means to be one. Maybe that is okay.

The Trinity is the only doctrine devoted its own special day in the calendar of the church year. Many events, some mythical, some more classically historical, are so honored but only one doctrine: the Trinity. Many argue that this may not have been the best move the church ever made—not because the Trinity is uninteresting or unimportant, or because so many have died in fights about it, but because comprehending it is, in the end, an impossible task. The concept of the Trinity, you see, was and is an attempt, a totally understandable one, to explain a Reality that is—when all is said and done—simply ineffable. Through the ages, I don't suppose God has been particularly surprised to watch as we have attempted to describe and characterize the Divine and to assign to God particular modalities and purposes. It is what we do, often feeling better and more in control when we write tomes about what we suppose to be true—as though word count equals truth or profundity.

One of the sources from which we generally draw authority about theological premises, the Bible, is a total wash for us in this regard. If you paid careful attention to the scripture readings this morning, you may have noticed that not one of them said anything about "The Trinity." It is not mentioned in scripture. Certainly God the Father is in the Bible; Jesus, God the Son, is there; and the Spirit of God is mentioned in several different ways and places. But the idea that the three of them made up the "Trinity" is nowhere to be found.

And, yet, in my soul I believe there is something very right about it. The heart of the Trinity is the heart of the gospel, resting as it does on the idea of a loving relation. God is not a solitary subject or an abstract force but a being who somehow exists in relationship. Augustine translated Father, Son and Holy Spirit as "Lover, Beloved and the Love that flows between." It was the Cappadocian Fathers, Basil the Great, his brother, Gregory of Nyssa, and their friend, the other Gregory, who first began in the late 4th century to codify the nature of God as Trinity. Theirs remains a compelling understanding; they told us that it is the endless energy of love in relation that reveals who God is: Father, Son and Spirit.

From that we get notions like God is creator, the maker of everything, the One who came from nothing and is everything. And that God is also the redeemer, the One who could not accept how desperately we had marred the divine plan for us and so acted in the world—again—and this time not just as creator but now as redeemer, coming to us in the form of a man, Jesus, bearing the truth and fullness of the Christ. And completing the triad is the notion that God is also the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies and sustains us, surrounding us with God.

Honestly that works about as well as anything I can think of. Is it doctrinal? Is it orthodox? I guess—for as much as any of that means. But it seems important to me to admit that these words and concepts are not the perfect or only words that can be used to speak of God. In

our end of the religious world, we claim that words truly matter. They matter in how we inculcate our young and how we allow them to limit our experience and imagination.

And so at St. Bart's we constantly struggle with our language. We worry about gender usage with regard to God, some of us worrying more about it than others. In the theological world in which I live, it goes without saying that God is genderless, that Father is no more exclusively correct than Mother, that though Jesus was a man, the Christ of the church and the redeemer of our souls is not bound by gender identification, and that the Spirit, even in extant scripture, is more often referred to as feminine than masculine. We ponder the weight of a tradition we cherish versus the openness of new language that challenges our culturally conditioned language about God. It is difficult; and it punches buttons on all sides, even to this day in 2013,.

Though there is not an easy answer to how we should talk about God, there is an admission that must be made concerning all words about God. Yes, they matter; yes, they are even essential; but particularly in God-talk they are only as good as they are. At their best they take us to the edge, oddly and somewhat counter-intuitively at the end of the day inviting us to stare wordlessly into the ultimate mystery. We can't understand; we don't need to understand. This may be why through the years the wisest thing often said about the Trinity is that it is a mystery. Sometimes that has been said with smugness, as though it is a particular mystery to those who can't or are unwilling to see, solvable only to those with keenness not available to all. For me, it is not a mystery like that, not a mystery to be solved but one simply to behold and with which to live, acknowledging the notion of Trinity as an honest effort but not an ultimate one. Only God is ultimate; our words about God never are.

The spirit of truth our gospel lesson speaks of this morning is about living a life with God, not about defining a life with God. The most intriguing line in today's gospel lesson is Jesus' comment to his disciples: "There is much more that I'd like to tell you, but I am unable to at this time for you are not ready to hear it. You will need more time to grow before you can understand all that I have to say. The Spirit will continue to lead you to truth long after I am gone."

These are some of the most encouraging words in all scripture, for they tell us that we neither have nor need the final word; much remains to be unfolded. Our greatest danger, it seems to me, is to imprison the spirit with the limitations of our own imaginations, to find certainty when the book is still being written. Anne Lamott, one of my favorite writers, in speaking of her long and hard journey in coming to faith, once wrote, "I finally realized that I didn't need to understand the hypostatic unity of the Trinity. I just needed to turn my life over to whoever came up with redwood trees."

Yes, that works for me. I just need to turn my life over to the one who came up with redwoods and grandchildren and puppy dogs and love. The rest will come as it comes, and that will be just fine.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

©2013 St. Bartholomew's Church in The City of New York.

*For information about St. Bart's and its life of faith and mission
write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212-378-0222, or visit stbarts.org.
St. Bart's, 325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022*