

Family Connections

Isaiah 6:1-8 & Romans 8:12-17

Trinity Sunday/11th June 2006

Legend has it that when St. Patrick (386-493) began to preach the gospel in Ireland he searched for symbols and metaphors native to Celtic culture and religion to help convey his message. Preaching out in the open air on the Trinity one day he reached down and plucked a shamrock from the grass at his feet and showed it to the people. Before Patrick arrived, the Celts long connected divinity to triads, to sets of three. Three was a holy, mystical number. The triad or trefoil, as it is known, is also found in other religions. In Arabia the trefoil is called *shamrakh* and was sacred in Iran, an emblem of the Persian triads possessing special significance. Among the Druids, the shamrock was a sacred plant. When Patrick lifted up the shamrock, he transformed its significance by saying here is an illustration of the Trinity: three leaves in one. Clever lad, wee Patrick. Accommodating and modifying culture in order to communicate the faith. He was a good evangelist – as were many of the Celtic Christians.

It's been said that in the end all metaphors and analogies breakdown. Metaphors are helpful, but every metaphor takes us only so far. No metaphor has the power to connect us with the truth it seeks to convey. The shamrock might point us to an understanding of the Trinity, but it's not the best analogy. So, what is? That's the critical question. I remember learning as a boy in Vacation Bible School one summer that the Trinity is like water taking different forms: ice, liquid, and steam. With such answers it is easy to see why early Christians were accused of practicing polytheism by their contemporaries, first by Jews who have always affirmed in the *Shema*, "*Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad.*" "Hear, O Israel, the LORD is our God. The LORD is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4-9). And then later in Islam, we find these words in the Koran, "They do blaspheme who say: Allah is one of three in trinity. For there is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet" (Koran 5:73). Is the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God who *is* Jesus Christ, really like a shamrock or water? Are these the best analogies we can come up with?

The answer is no. One of the problems with the shamrock analogy is that it's too *static*. It just *is*. At least there is some movement involved in the water analogy, but there's something missing. And what's missing is the *relationship* between them – we have either ice, or liquid, or steam.¹

¹ After the sermon I was informed by Dr. Cindy Bolognese that under certain pressurized conditions all three elements can coexist simultaneously. But there is still no inherent relationship between them.

One of the greatest revolutions of thought in Christian thought occurred within the experience of the early Greek church fathers, people like Basil of Caesarea (330-379) and Gregory of Nyssa (335-394), and the other Cappadocian theologians writing in the fourth century, who broke new ground when they began to discern God in a new way. It cut against *everything* found in theology or philosophy up to that point. They talked about “a new and paradoxical conception of *united separation* and *separated unity*.”² In reading scripture and paying close attention to the movement of God in the Bible, they came upon a major conceptual and theological innovation: God is “a sort of continuous and indivisible community.”³ The word God would thus be understood in a new way. “God is no more than what the Father, Son, and Spirit give to and receive from each other in the separable communion that is the outcome of their love.”⁴ God is not an idea or a singular being with three forms, but that God is inherently a relationship. What then do we mean when we say the word “God”? The meaning of the word is communion: “there is no ‘being’ of God other than this dynamic of persons in relation.”⁵ God *is* a *community of relations*, persons in relation that give themselves to each other and receive back into themselves in love. These were ideas that developed in the Eastern Church, but never completely incorporated by Augustine (354-430) in the Western Church. Augustine never really developed the notion of God as a relationship, thus leaving his stamp on the theological tradition of Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. It’s only been in the last thirty years that Western theologians have begun to learn anew from the Eastern Church with exciting possibilities for the contemporary church.⁶

Today is Trinity Sunday in the liturgical year. Often talk about the Trinity leaves us in a cold alley of theological abstractions – which is probably where you feel yourself to be right about now! What I hope to show this morning is that it doesn’t have to be this way. Reflections on the Trinity open for us exciting possibilities for the contemporary church. This is all very practical. Trinitarian considerations, you might be thinking, should be left to theologians in seminary. That would be a dangerous and foolish thing to do.

² Basil of Caesarea, Letters in *Document in Early Christian Thought* (Cambridge, 1975), cited in Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), 9. Emphasis mine.

³ Basil cited in Gunton, 9.

⁴ Gunton, 10.

⁵ Gunton, 10.

⁶ Gunton’s work is just one of many recent studies on the Eastern Church’s contribution to the doctrine of the Trinity. See also Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London, 1957); John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in the Personhood and the Church* (London, 1985); Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* (London, 1981).

Truth is, I believe (in case you haven't figured this out by now) God grants the capacity for *all* of us to be theologians. God expects and allows us to be theologians. Theology, quite simply, is God talk. But it's not that simple. God language must never be taken for granted. Grace enables us to speak of divine things, to say words about God, literally, *theos* (God) *logos* (word), in order to become people who risk talking of God, that is, people who attempt to utter with our lips mysteries we have no right to behold, let alone competence to apprehend (as Isaiah knew). To talk of God means human language is imbued with the capacity to convey something of the holiness of God before which angels veil their faces. What is required is sanctified speech. It is an awesome and amazing thing to utter the Word of God, to speak about who God is, to express through the inadequacy of our language the language of the One who has called us into being, redeemed us through the Word made flesh, sends us out into the world through the Holy Spirit to *say* something redemptive, to *do* something redemptive, so that all might dwell in the divine communion that is God.

What difference does all this make? A lot. *How you view or conceptualize God, how you talk about God inevitably shapes the way you live your life and thus shapes the life of the church.* The Trinity points us to this provocative image of God as persons in community, in relation, persons existing in a relationship of mutual love and edification, giving themselves over to each other; persons who in love respect each other and make space for each other; persons in relationship who build each other up and seek each other's welfare. The Father loves the Son and frees the Spirit to serve the Son and the Father. The Son loves the Father and the Spirit. They live in service to each other. Can you see why the image of the shamrock is just too static? The leaves don't relate to each other. But persons do. From Genesis through Revelation God reveals God's self as a type of "person" who stands in a special relationship to humans, who abides with us, a God who was embodied personally in the flesh, who talked and lived and ate with disciples, face-to-face. That's who God is. *God is a relationship and known through interpersonal encounter.*

Paul is using a similar kind of image when he talks about being "adopted" into the family of God. Paul wants the Romans to know who they are in Christ and what has been given to them through Christ. Did you notice references to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all contained in these verses? So that to be "in Christ" includes being swept up into the family or community of God, into that divine relationship, where we get to encounter God in a new way. We have been given the "spirit of adoption," Paul says, in that we have been incorporated into a new community and new family. One of the tasks of the Holy Spirit is to bear witness to our spirit, that is convince us and remind us, that we are children of God; we are part of God's family, and thus heirs of

God's blessings and joy. The Spirit then "adopts" us or engrafts us into the family, the community of God. This is what happens when we pray; our prayers become part of that divine conversation, and we are lifted up into that community. Or when we cry out "Abba," "Father," literally, "Daddy," we are affirming our place in the household of God.

Still abstract? Let's bring this closer to home. *Our lives will echo the God we worship and serve. When the church gathers together, our life together echoes or reflects the God we have come to know in Jesus Christ.* As theologian Colin Gunton wrote, "The church is called to be the kind of reality at the finite level that God is in eternity."⁷ The family of God, as it were, shapes the family of the church, because all of us have been adopted into that family, into the wide embrace of God in Christ. While human life and divine life are not to be confused, for they are not the same, there is what we might call a "family resemblance" – or there ought to be.⁸ The more we see God as a dynamic community of persons who love each other, take delight in each other, give themselves freely to each other, make space for each other, are hospitable to each other and to us by adopting and including us in their family, the more our lives together will be defined by such a love. This image of God compels us to live differently. We find ourselves taking delight in one another, building each other up, never putting down, freely giving ourselves to one another, making space for one another, hospitable to the other and inclusive of all people the Spirit is adopting into the fellowship of God and God's people.

On Thursday of this week, the 217th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) will convene in Birmingham, AL. I'll be there for what many call a kind of "family reunion." These are appropriate thoughts on the Sunday before the Assembly. As our denomination faces many challenges and struggles with issues and forces that some say will tear our Presbyterian family apart, it is fitting to remember that the wider church family is also called to echo the God we worship and serve. My hope and prayer is we will be able to see our "family resemblance" throughout the week, so that the church both at the local level and the national level will echo the God we have to know and love in Jesus Christ. Lord, may it be so.

Rev. Dr. Kenneth E. Kovacs

⁷ "...the being of the church should echo the dynamic of the relations between the three persons who together constitute the deity." Gunton, 81.

⁸ "Family resemblance," a term used by German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), cited in Alan Torrance, *Persons in Communion: Trinitarian Description and Human Participation* (Edinburgh, 1996), quoted by Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (Westminster/ John Knox Press, 2000), 39.

Catonsville Presbyterian Church
Catonsville, Maryland