

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

Because we pause on this day to marvel at the Trinitarian nature of our God, and because it has been some time since I have done so, I would very much like to remind you about why I like so much to use this introduction to my weekly sermons: God makes us, loves us, and keeps us. You may remember how I have explained it in the past. This phrase I use is a paraphrase of something written by Julian of Norwich some six hundred years ago. Norwich, in northeastern England, was a busy commercial and cultural center in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. And it was a noted religious center, too, with dozens of church buildings within the city walls, many of which had an anchorage, or an attached room where the parish's hermit or anchorite lived in seclusion. Such an anchorite, or anchoress, was selected by a parish and celebrated by a special service of induction, which was much like a funeral. The hermit would live according to rules which were publicized in manuals of the time, and serve as a spiritual advisor to the people of the area. Julian has become the most famous of these anchoresses because of her reputation at the time and because of the writings she left behind.

Her written work was based on 16 visions she had during a youthful near-death experience, in which she was given "showings" by Christ and by Mary, his mother. As her health miraculously improved, she wrote down her visions (in a remarkable practice of journaling!) and then spent her life contemplating and writing about her reflections and understandings of these gifts. In one of her visions, she describes this scene: Christ shewed me a little thing the size of an hazel-nut, lying in the palm of my hand, and it was round as a ball. It is all that is made. It lasteth and ever shall, because God made it; God loveth it; God keepeth it.

The manuscript of Julian's written work, her legacy to us, bears the title "Revelations of Divine Love", and I think that is a perfect way to think of the Trinity; all that has been shared with us by scripture, theological study, and the personal experience of faithful people down through the ages is just that: a revelation. It is not ourselves which we proclaim, but rather God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. We did not invent the Trinity in some desperate effort to describe and understand God; God's nature has been shared with us, for better or worse, in this way. It might seem a confusing way. It might sometimes seem a contradictory way. But this revelation was meant to be a gift, after all, a gift in which we ought to delight, a gift which we may enjoy by turning it round and round, exploring its possibilities, adoring its paradox of complexity and simplicity. In shorthand, we use a doxology to name it, to express it, to capture its essence, when we speak of the Father, the Son, and The Holy Spirit, when we speak of God our original parent, God our rescuing Savior, and God our divine inspiration. God in three persons, blessed Trinity.

When something seems innately confusing, we often turn to metaphor to help us understand. And the Trinity, that is one God, but three persons, one God, not three, yet comprised of three more or less separate entities, is no exception. There are many metaphors used to describe the Trinity, to make the concept of the Trinity more accessible and understandable. Some are pretty good, others are just plain silly, but all have flaws, and sometimes even heresies. St. Patrick was said to explain the Trinity as the three leaves of a Shamrock. Some have said that the Trinity is like an egg, which has a shell, a yolk, and eggwhite (albumen). Others say that it is like the sun, which not only is a star, but produces light and heat. Some say that the trinity is like water, which can exist as a solid, a liquid, and a gas, but that has the problem of modalism. Some say that it is like a musical chord, which in its given key has three notes which join their frequencies to produce a new musical expression. Or the fleur-di-lis, the lily with three petals in one blooming flower. I have even heard the Trinity described as Neapolitan ice cream, with its three flavors of chocolate, vanilla, and strawberry, being of the same basic substance, somehow representing the three aspects: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Yeah, these metaphors and analogies are inadequate, and, as often as not, misleading. Fact is, our feeble brains, and probably even the brains of great theologians and scholars too, are incapable of understanding the full nature of God, though it's tempting to think that using imaginative structures like these, we might. Fact is, we are left with this challenge by Jesus himself, the teachings he shared, and the conversations he had with the disciples. He spoke often of his relationship with the Father, his apparent parent. While he prayed to the father, and taught his followers to do the same, he repeatedly insisted that he and the father were one. What did he mean by that? Then he promised that the Holy Spirit would be a companion to them, coming to them as an advocate and guide, continuing the teachings he began, leading them into all truth, somehow distinctly different than the Father and the Son, but with the same message from the same source, from God. As we try to decipher that message, we often scratch our heads and wonder about the meaning of life, but hopefully we can do it joyfully and thankfully.

But, it's not just Jesus...there are clues all around the landscape of our Holy Scriptures about the nature and personalities of God. Our readings today from the Isaiah, from Paul, and from the Gospel of John are good examples. In Our selection from the ancient Prophet Isaiah, from some 500 years before Christ, describes the Lord God enshrined in the heavens while employing an angelic seraph to initiate a saving relationship with humans by touching the prophet's tongue with a hot coal from the altar fire. Having thus been rescued and purged from sinfulness, the prophet is motivated by some divine inspiration, or spirit, to offer his life's work to witness to others, saying "Here am I; send me!" In Paul's Letter to the Romans, we are reminded that we are indeed children of God, the Parent, God's own heirs along with Christ Jesus, and we are meant to realize that important fact by the witness of the Holy Spirit. In our Gospel Reading from John, We are famously taught, like Nicodemus, that God so loved the world that the father sent his only Son to us as a sacred gift, that we might be reborn of the Holy Spirit. Our clues from scripture, taken together, indicate that 3 persons of the Trinity have been living together in God since the beginning and will last together forever. Each is a revelation of God's divine love, and the three are forever bound together by God's love.

So, the early Christian church was left with all these clues, and with a need to assemble them all and devise a kind of mission statement. And so, by conference and council, by argument and royal decree from the Emperor Constantine, by prayer and reflection, by study and testimony, by hook or crook, the fourth century patriarchs and bishops were determined to come up with a statement which described the Christian faith. And by the end of that century they had developed the Nicene Creed, which we will recite together in a few minutes. And you will notice when we do, that the Creed is divided into three sections, one specifically for each of God's three personalities as revealed through scripture, tradition, and personal experience. And you will notice that you are asked to stand for that recitation. It's clearly not the same thing, but it may remind you of standing for the Pledge of Allegiance, or maybe vice-versa. Thinking about that comparison, we stand because we are standing with others, in this case around the world, to make common witness. Instead of facing the US flag, however, we traditionally face the altar, which represents our common devotion to each other and to God, since it is the place where we gather in God's presence. And, I suppose like the pledge to all the things our flag should stand for, there may be days when we are concerned that the words we recite are not entirely rooted in reality. But we say them anyway, because they touch our hearts.

The first part of the Nicene Creed, which has been recited in Christian churches for some 1600 years now, witnesses to what touches our hearts about God's creative personality. The Father, or Parent, has made all that is, seen and unseen, and is One God. The second section of the Creed is specifically about Jesus, the Christ, God's son, who is also God. One God. Of one being with the Father (and the Holy Spirit). Jesus wasn't made by the Father like the created earth and heavens, but was begotten, or born, as a part of the Parent, to be a saving, redeeming personality by the power of the Holy Spirit. Yeah, all of this classic discussion about just who Jesus was, and Christ is, was especially confused and argumentative...but this is what they came up with. Christ is God from God, Light from Light, and true God from true God. Keep it simple. Actually BTW, I don't think Jesus really wanted all this to be so hard for ordinary folks like us to understand. Look again at what he says to Nicodemus... And then the third part of the Creed expresses our belief that the Holy Spirit is also a part and parcel of Almighty God, a passion, a breath, which sustains (or keeps) us. By the end of the fourth century, the church leaders had agreed that God's inspiring personality had spoken through the prophets of old, was expressed through the catholic, or universal, church, attended us in baptism like it had for Jesus there at the Jordan River, and also gave us enduring hope for resurrection and life beyond the grave. That by the power of the Holy Spirit, i.e. God, we will be kept in eternal life.

Yes, the early church leaders, those successors to the original Apostles, chose to frame their description of the faith using the threefold nature of God as they had received from the clues scripture had left behind. And one of their legacies to us, then, is this creed their councils in Constantinople and its suburb of Nicaea produced. I suppose, though, that it sometimes raises more questions than it answers, including about the Trinity. But, it is often in living the questions, and living them faithfully as Jesus recommends to Nicodemus, which gives color and adventure to our relationships, including our relationship with God. And, let's not forget the fascinating relationships implied by the three persons with each other! What amazing vibrancy can you imagine as these three interact with one another?! What marvels of creation, redemption, and sustenance can result from such collaboration?! There is much to ponder and study about the Trinitarian nature, the three distinct personalities and ministries of God, but when it all appears to be overwhelming, I suggest that you do what I did when confronted by theological conundrums in seminary: Just meditate on the trustworthy revelation that God makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen