

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
June 3, 2007  
Trinity Sunday  
The Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 6:1-8  
Psalm 29  
Revelation 4:1-11  
John 16:5-15

Today is a rather unique occasion in the life of the church, especially as it relates to the liturgical calendar and the Christian year. It is Trinity Sunday, and it is the one day of the year when we focus our attention more on the *being* and the *nature* of God than on the *works* and *actions* of God in history to save us.

In the early church no special office or day was assigned to the Holy Trinity, but when doctrinal controversies and heresies began to spread it became necessary for the church fathers to respond. Perhaps no controversy illustrated this more than the Arian controversy in the early fourth century.

Arius was Presbyter in the church at Alexandria. He reacted against the Nicene Creed, formulated by the council of Nicea in 325 A.D., and particularly against the creed's affirmation that Jesus was of the same "substance" (*homoousion*) with the Father. Arius thought that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were materially separate from each other and that the Son was created by the Father.

One of the principal bishops arguing against Arius was a man named Athanasius. He drafted the creedal statement which we will read today instead of the Nicene Creed, which we customarily recite.

You may find the Athanasian Creed a bit obtuse and difficult, but Wesley's words are good counsel to us at that point. Wesley, in speaking of the doctrine of the Trinity, reminded his readers that we should not make the mistake of doubting the *fact* that God has revealed something because we do not understand the *manner* in which God has revealed it.

And so today is set aside for us to worship and ponder the being and the mystery of God. In the biblical tradition, this God is *one* God who is experienced as the transcendent Creator (such as we have in our Old Testament reading), as incarnate (such as we find in the Gospel), and as present in and among the lives of believers in the Church. He is the one God, known to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Our lessons today give us the chance to reflect on this reality. In particular, our lesson from John's Gospel this morning is the fifth and final statement on the Holy Spirit by Jesus to his disciples in what have come to be known as Jesus' farewell discourses. (cf. John 14:1-16:33)

In these farewell materials, Jesus speaks to his disciples about the Holy Spirit, where he affirms many things about the Spirit and its activity. In today's

lesson, Jesus affirms some things that related directly to the Trinity, and are worth our attention.

Jesus begins by saying, “there is so much more I want to tell you, but you can’t bear it now” (v. 12).

This tells us that the words of the historical Jesus did not address every human question or need or problem that might arise. Because Jesus cannot address every conceivable need or problem with his disciples, he tells them that the Spirit, when he comes, will guide them into all truth (v. 13).

This is a frightening promise, if you think about it. This promise of Jesus has been used to sanction all kinds of bizarre ideas and teachings, especially in cases where persons are speaking about the end of the world or where they claim to discern the will of God for a particular situation.

But in spite of this danger, we should not abandon the conviction that the Holy Spirit continues to guide the Church today. What we should do is pay close attention to Jesus’ words here about the guidance of the Spirit. And what Jesus says here is that the Holy Spirit will not speak or act independently, but rather will glorify Christ and will reveal only that which comes from Christ and from God.

This reminds us of two important truths. On the one hand, we affirm that the Holy Spirit guides the Church in the present day, because Jesus’ teachings could not possibly address every conceivable need that might arise.

But on the other hand, we also affirm that the Spirit's guidance of the Church is in direct continuity with what we know of Jesus and of God the Father.

So, if we believe that the Holy Spirit guides the Church of today, how can we test or measure whether the spirit by which any person or group speaks is really the Holy Spirit?

That is a difficult question to answer. But for starters, we begin with this answer: Are that person or group's actions and words in accordance with what we know of Jesus of Nazareth and of God, as historically revealed in the Scriptures and the tradition of the Church?

This criteria is not always applied easily, but it's a good starting place.

As we gather today to celebrate the mystery of God's being and all that it means for us to worship One God in Three Persons, we are reminded again that just as Jesus was not a maverick who acted in isolation from the Father, so the Holy Spirit is not a maverick who operates in isolation from Jesus and his earthly ministry.

I think it is significant that Jesus says of the Spirit that he will lead and guide his followers into all truth by reminding them of Jesus' teachings and life. In other words, I don't think the role of the Spirit is to invent or produce "new" truth, but to give us fuller insight and understanding of the truth as it has been revealed to us in Jesus of Nazareth.

When I was a student at MidAmerica Nazarene University, Connie and I attended College Church of the Nazarene, which was typically filled with between 3,000-4,000 worshipers on any given Sunday.

Connie and I frequently sat down near the front just to the right of center. In that particular section of the church, the first few pews of that section were reserved for deaf persons. Throughout the service, an interpreter was seated in the front of that section, and as the service progressed the interpreter would be there, signing the words of text and music to those who were present but could not hear.

That, I believe, is the role of the Holy Spirit in guiding the Church of today. The Holy Spirit as our paraclete stands along side us, constantly “signing” for us the words and will of Jesus as we encounter the needs of a new day. He guides us into the future with reference to what Jesus has done in the past.

Wesley was right. We may not fully comprehend *how* God comes to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But the Scriptures clearly reveal to us that He does so. That truth has been safeguarded by the Church through the centuries, and has been passed down to us. It is one of the core, nonnegotiable pillars of the Faith (in my opinion). And it is up to us to preserve it, live it, and articulate it. By God’s grace and with God’s help, we shall do just that.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.