

SERMON for Sunday, June 3, 2007  
 John 16:12-15, Romans 5:1-5  
 Trinity Sunday

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### It's Too Hard!

Every once in a while I think that I will, in my older age, turn into a marathon runner. As one older – that is, my age, friend said, *I am more likely to place in the 60+ group, because there are far fewer entrants.* But then I read articles about the training involved and realize how far I would have to travel, both mentally and physically, from my three-mile walks on the treadmill and in my neighborhood, and decide against it. *It's just too hard.* Running marathons, and a lot of other things in life we find rather daunting. Some are in the realm of cosmetic touches, like a manicured lawn and garden, or a tidy desk, or keeping in touch with friends and second-cousins and planning a vacation right down to the last detail, getting around to sorting through all the old family pictures and putting them in albums. *It's just too hard.* But then there are the things that are really difficult, like walking with a life partner on the journey to the end of life, or needing to stand back while a young adult awkwardly moves toward independence, or trying to discern when to jump in and intervene in someone's destructive life pattern. So many times we just want to throw up our hands, quit, and proclaim, *It's just too hard!* There are even those times when we look outside ourselves, to try to understand the depths of destruction and violence and hunger and disease in this world and the mess all around us, to gain some insight into how meaningful change might occur instead of our piddling little stabs at it all, to keep up hope. And we hold our collective breath, all the while thinking, *It's just too hard!*

Christian scholar and theologian Dorothy Sayers said much the same thing when commenting on the subject of the Trinity, *The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the whole darn thing incomprehensible!* What a quote for this Trinity Sunday, when we should celebrate rather than bemoan the manifestation of God in three persons. But the reality is that we take to heart the phrase – from St. Anselm of Canterbury of the eleventh century - *faith seeking understanding*, too much to heart, emphasizing the need for rational thinking only, of God the Father, of Jesus, of the Holy Spirit. It is sometimes as if we think – and there's that word again – that we must wrap our minds around God in order to live in true faith, in order to believe, instead of letting ourselves be wrapped around by God. Now, why does that ever make a difference?

Last week I was at a preaching conference in Nashville – where, by the way, it was far too hot and humid, even in late May, to do much exploration in appreciation of the city, and where the conference schedule kept us busy enough to not do much exploration to further appreciate the city's music culture or barbeque cuisine. I had arranged to meet up with and attend the meeting with a friend from Dallas, and over the few days we each saw a few people we knew out of the 1600 attendees. (Can you imagine that, 1600 preachers all in one place at one time? I wonder if anyone in Nashville ever knew?) At one point, at a break during a lecture, I was looking around at my colleagues. It was great people-watching, but rather one-dimensional. I knew all of these men and women were preachers, or had something to do with a church or church-related institution, but little else. Geography and culture that shapes them? their engagement in their communities? personality? hobbies? tastes? families? habits? hopes? And looking at me, no one could tell my inside from only

seeing my outside at a given moment. Ah, we know this, but when it involves God, how often we have a one-dimensional view.

Have you heard about the idea of *flat Daddy*, an effort by some group to provide a life-size cardboard cutout of the father of children whose parent is serving in Iraq? The purpose, of course, is to remind the kids of their Dad who is not present in person. I saw an interview of one particular family, and for a few months, the flat Daddy went everywhere with the children, to soccer games, on trips, stood in the corner of the room where the family was eating or watching TV. And the mother thought that the idea was a good one. But after a while, the children got more and more whiny about missing their dad and less and less appreciative of the cardboard substitute. The *flat Daddy* was one-dimensional, and not like their real dad at all, only a paper picture. And so it is with our experience of God. If we focus solely on one aspect of God, we miss the fullness of God.

Unlike Dorothy Sayers incomprehensible definition of the Trinity, here is another from a group of Presbyterian theologians, *In sovereign love God created the heavens and the earth and called and formed the people of Israel to be a light to all the nations. In costly grace the Lord Jesus ministered among us and was crucified and raised for us and for our salvation. In transforming power the Holy Spirit renews and sanctifies us, draws us into new communion with God and each other, awakens our praise and worship, and equips us for the service of God in the world. The triune God does all this through 'the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit'*, words we find in 2 Corinthians 13:14. A more comprehensible definition? A God who loves and creates, whose love we see in the life of Christ as he lived and died, whose love is present through the spirit. To understand the Trinity is to experience *God's love overflowing*. And if God is limited for us only as one who created and then stands over and distant, then God is one-dimensional. And if God is limited for us by our focusing solely on a close personal relationship with Jesus, then God is one-dimensional. And if God is limited for us by our expectation that we experience God only by the feeling which we define as the presence of the Holy Spirit, then God is one-dimensional. *This is still too hard*.

Our language of God is, by definition, limited by human vocabulary and human capacity. And that is why we not only need to learn of God through study and through our minds, but also need to open ourselves to the full mystery of God, not so accessible, not always so comfortable, nor so easy. *God in Three Persons, Blessed Trinity*, not even discussed in those particular terms anywhere in Scripture, we name on this one Sunday of the year, then carefully put away until the next time, because the fullness of God is too great for us to see, to know, to understand, to experience. *It's just too hard*. Or is it?

So I turn to the language of poetry. Seventeenth century English poet John Donne spoke of the Trinity:

*Batter my heart, three-personed God; for You  
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to men;  
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me and bend  
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.*

And contemporary Christian songwriter and singer Kyle Matthews, in speaking of the many ways that our human love of God is so mercurial, so small, writes,

*Really, it's no surprise I'm inconsistent so much of the time.  
The only constant that always strikes me strange  
is finding your love unchanged. Finding your love  
solid, gracious, faithful, patient, ready to forgive.  
Reaching through me, always moving, Ever new and yet unchanged.*

It is the Trinity of whom he sings as well, the never-changing yet always-living God.

And that is really the essence of the Trinity, an unchanging God of love. Writer Penelope Mark-Stuart says that the key is to *look past our metaphors of God and even our own particular experiences of God to the Love who lives at the heart of it all – the Love who created our world and fashioned us with such care; the Love who passionately desired to become one of us and for a little while pitched his tent among us; and the Love who could not ultimately leave us but remains with us to inhabit every moment of our existence.*

The concept of the Trinity may seem like a dusty theological idea, belonging to the realm of the ancients. Those early church fathers, and they were mostly fathers and rarely mothers in those days, fought over what to include in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, and how to put forth a definition of God to which all Christians could assent, how to describe God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And the concept of the Trinity may seem like simply one more extended liturgical day after Easter, after the day of Pentecost and the far more exciting celebration of the coming of the Holy Spirit on those gathered as described in the book of Acts. That was exciting – tongues of fire, doves descending, languages galore, a hubbub of sound and fury so that any casual observer might think there was a drunken party going on. And the concept of the Trinity may seem to be better forgotten when summer and graduation and so many other wonderful events are to be celebrated. But the Trinity is for when life is *just too hard*, which is about all the time, isn't it? We celebrate the Trinity because God in all incredible dimensions will continue to enter into our world, into our souls, into our heads and hearts, to give us grace overflowing. We celebrate the Trinity because God will continue to call us to lives of praise and gratitude, lives of service. We celebrate the Trinity because God will continue to pour out God's love, and give us hope. That is not hard at all.

Thanks be to God. Amen.