

Trinity Sunday – 30 May 2010

John 16:12-15

“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31, *alternative Hebrew translations in italics*

8Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?
²On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand;
³beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals
she cries out: ⁴“To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live.

²²The LORD *fathered/ created/ acquired/ possessed* me
at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago.
²³Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth.
²⁴When there were no depths I was *brought forth/ birthed*
when there were no springs abounding with water.
²⁵Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was brought *forth/ birthed*—
²⁶when she had not yet made earth and fields,
or the world’s first bits of soil.
²⁷When he established the heavens, I was there,
when she drew a circle on the face of the deep,
²⁸when he made firm the skies above,
when she established the fountains of the deep,
²⁹when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command,
when she marked out the foundations of the earth,
³⁰then I was beside him, like *a master worker/ artisan or one who is growing*;
and I was a delight daily, rejoicing before her always,
³¹rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church. **Thanks be to God.**

Last week on the NPR's show Speaking of Faith, Krista Tippet interviewed an astrophysicist, who wrote a book titled, "Is God a Mathematician?"

We decided in our discussion of the Trinity this Wednesday that the answer to this question is most certainly, "No." There's no way that a mathematician came up with the Trinity. It just doesn't make any sense. One plus one plus one does not equal one. One divided by three does not equal one. Logically, God cannot be both three and one simultaneously.

But then Jonathan, whose father is a mathematician, reminded us that the number one is infinitely more complex than we realize. The number one itself is somewhat of a logical anomaly—proving its existence is nearly impossible. Actually, if you Google "proving the existence of the number one," what you get is a whole list of entries about proving the existence of God. Coincidence? I'll let you decide.

But even a brief look through Wikipedia entry about the number one proved Jonathan right. I could have spent a whole semester trying to understand the different definitions of the number one. Unit, fields, Mobius functions, Gaussian integers, Euler's totient function...

Maybe math is not the best framework for thinking about the Trinity, especially for someone like me, who stopped being interested in math right around the time when things started getting complex. Maybe there's another, more biblical approach.

Thank goodness for Proverbs and Wisdom. Surely, wisdom would help us understand better who God is...

When God finally appeared in a whirlwind and answered Job's complaints, God said, "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know!"

Wisdom, it seems, is the only one qualified to answer these questions. I can just picture her eagerly raising her hand, “Ooh, me! me! I know!” Except...wait a minute! Who is this Wisdom character? What is this, a FOURTH person of the Trinity? Now I’m really confused.

Is Wisdom a personification of Christ, the Word, that was there at the beginning, when God spoke the universe into being? Or is Wisdom the Spirit, the Wind, the Breath from God, that hovered over the waters when the earth was still a formless void? Or is Wisdom the Torah, the moral law, God’s commandments, which teach us how to love God and one another?

The Hebrew doesn’t clear things up for us. Did God create wisdom, father or give birth to her or does God merely possess wisdom like I know many of you do? Could be any of those. Was Wisdom beside God as a skilled artisan, a master worker, or like a little child, like one who is growing? Could be either.

In fact, the more I read this text, the more I got the feeling that God was teasing me, messing with my mind, being... playful. Like an artist or a little child. Listen.

Wisdom seems to paint a picture of creation, using long brush strokes. First down in the watery depths, the springs, then up to the mountains and hills; then down to the earth and the fields, the world’s first bits of soil. Is it just me or is Wisdom playing in the dirt?

Then up to the heavens again, where she describes God drawing circles on the deep. Then sculpting firm the skies up above. Is God doing arts and crafts, like some of us did on Friday at Eutaw Marshburn Elementary?

But God isn’t just drawing on the sea, He’s bossing it around. It reminds me of when my cousins and I used to go down to the Gulf and pretend we were ninjas, battling the waves. We would Karate chop them and yell out challenges and commands—little did we know were mimicking God’s own taming of the chaotic waters.

Through all this remembering and storytelling, Wisdom seems to be thoroughly enjoying herself—rejoicing in God’s inhabited world, delighting in the human race. And God seems to be enjoying her just as much.

This isn’t cold, hard logic at work—this is play! It’s like Wisdom, whom I expected to be all serious and heavy, is laughing and telling me to lighten up. She almost sounds like the poet Billy Collins trying to explain to his students about the nature of poetry.

Listen to what happens if you replace the word “poem” with the word “Trinity.”

I ask them to take the Trinity
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into the Trinity
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the Trinity’s room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of the Trinity
waving at the author’s name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the Trinity to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

We keep trying to torture an explanation from God, but God just won't hold still. One minute God looks like a Father, a potter, a master artisan, the next minute God is literally giving birth to the frost (that's in Job). Then God is a jilted lover and a mother hen who longs to gather her chicks. God looks like a burning bush, then a cloud that stays with his people while they are in the wilderness, then a dove. Then like a rabbi, then like a healer, then like a rabble rouser, then like a death row inmate. Then like a gardener, a stranger, then like bread and wine. Then like the rush of a violent wind and tongues of fire.

There is something about the claim that God is at once both Three and One that illuminates the incomprehensibility of God, the mystery of God, and the movement of God. Christians don't profess faith in a Triune God because it makes mathematical sense.

We believe in a Triune God because we've experienced God's overflowing love in the person of Jesus Christ and the movement of some kind of Holy Spirit, that sometimes seems like a violent rushing wind and sometimes seems like a breath of fresh air. And what delight we can take in a God who not only loves, but is love. A God who is triune is by nature relational—and how else could God be love.

Martin Luther said that the Trinity is the way that we stammer and lisp after God, and he was right! I could not find an image of the Trinity that seemed to express the movement, love, and interconnectedness that Scripture seems to point to. And honestly, exclusively male language for God doesn't seem to adequately reflect a God who created both male and females in her image.

The author of *The Shack* gave it a really good shot. William Young depicted the Trinity as an African American woman who called herself Papa and cooked a lot; a middle eastern Jewish man who spent a lot of time—you guessed it—fishing and making things out of wood, and looking at the stars; and the third person was an ephemeral Asian woman who collected tears, who never stood still, and who did an awful lot of gardening. They could all read each other's minds.

Their threeness may have been more apparent than their oneness, but nobody's perfect. The point was not to fix the Trinity into these three forms, but to loosen our grip on traditional images of the Trinity, while expressing their harmony and love, and for that I was grateful. Even Wisdom makes an appearance.

I was also encouraged by our own denomination's paper on the Trinity, presented to the General Assembly in 2006. While they affirm the church's traditional language of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as the anchor of our Trinitarian language, they also seem to embody the spirit of Wisdom, delighting in God's creation and in the myriad expressions of the Trinity that dance in and out of Scripture.

For example, we might take a hint from Paul in Romans 11, and call God the One from whom, through whom, and in whom we offer our praise.

Or we might gather our names from Hebrews, John, and the Psalms, and listen for God the Speaker, Word, and Breath.

We might draw from Isaiah, Matthew and Job and call God Compassionate Mother, Beloved Child, and Lifegiving Womb.

We might end in Revelation with the One Who Was, Who Is, and Who Is to Come.

We could go on and on. We will never capture God. But who wants a God who can be captured? Instead we have a Living God who embodies love in relationship. So what if we can't explain it? We can embrace it. We can be witness to it. Like wisdom, we can rejoice and delight in it. And we can live our lives in such a way that the Holy, Triune God rejoices in us as well. Amen.