

Trinity Sunday Year B
SPC June 7, 2009

A few weeks ago, on a warmer than average spring day, a young mother and her 4 year old son were walking on the beach at Plum Island.

And as children often do, the young boy was running along out in front of his mom, and stopping every now and then to investigate some fascinating thing or another, that he found in the sand.

At one point, he stopped short, and she found him looking with great wonder and confusion at a seagull that lay dead near the water's edge.

She was immediately concerned, because she hadn't yet had any occasion to talk to him about death.

"Mumma ... ?" he looked up at her questioningly.

"Mumma, what happened to the bird?"

The young mother panicked.

"Well ... ummm ... God ... God took the bird up to Heaven," she finally said.

The boy looked at the bird lying in the sand at his feet.

"Mumma ... ?"

"Yes?"

Didn't God like the bird?"

"Oh, of course honey ... God loved the bird!" she replied.

"He did?" the little guy answered, "Well then ... why did he throw it back down?!"

I felt obliged to tell a bird story today, because a bird is the symbol of the Holy Spirit, which ... who ... is the hardest to define aspect of our God, of the God who has been revealed to us as the Holy Trinity.

But, in the words of author Sue Monk Kidd ... we need to start thinking about God as being much more ... than just two guys and a bird.

And when it comes to the things of God, you and I are a lot like that little boy on the beach. All we can really know for sure about God is what's right in front of us ... what God has shown us about God.

On this Sunday every year, we wrap up our celebration of the central mysteries of our faith, culminating in the passion, death, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. And we top it all off by celebrating what has come to be called Trinity Sunday.

In Christianity, the Trinity is what God has put right in front of us, to help us to know and understand our God, who's really far beyond all knowing and all understanding.

Down through the ages, in scripture, and in tradition, and in the experiences of people of faith, God has revealed God's self as a sacred community of love, as a unity of diversity, as three and yet one.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Abba, Jesus, and Sophia. The Source of all being, the Incarnate Word, and the Wisdom that permeates all things. Creator, Christ, and Spirit.

Now lots of folks, who I dare say were a lot smarter than me, have made fairly reasonable attempts to try to explain the concept, the idea, of the Trinity.

The greatest theological minds in history, like Augustine and Aquinas, Bonaventure, Richard Hooker, Elizabeth Johnson, and untold others have all had some success in trying to help us understand what God meant by revealing God's self as the Trinity.

And that's all fine, I suppose. Except that God is not a concept, or an idea. To try to get your mind, your intellect around God, is really an exercise in futility. Because God isn't a concept ... God is a relationship.

God is love. And love, in order to be love, has to have someplace to go ... it has to have an "other," there has to be a beloved.

In the community of relationship that is the Trinity, God's other, God's beloved, is God's very self.

In the Trinity, God is given to God and God receives God. It's literally the love-life of God ... it's the essence of God's very being.

It's the Trinity ... who is not a concept, but a relationship, a sacred community of self-giving love, a unity of diversity that embraces all and excludes none.

Well that's all well and good, but what about creation, what about everything God made ... what about us?

In the second reading today, St. Paul tells us what about us. You and I and all of creation are "adopted" by God ... in Jesus Christ,

by the Holy Spirit. In Christ, we're swept up into the love-life of God, into the relationship of love that is God.

It's breath-taking to think about, really. Remember Jesus' words, "As the Father has loved me, so I love you." Can you imagine?

The vastness, the immensity, the enormity of the love that caused the creation of all things, the love that holds everything in existence, the heart that beats at the very center of the universe ... loves us, just as much as God loves God's very self.

That section from Paul's letter to the Romans highlights the interplay of the three persons of the Trinity, as does today's reading from the gospel of John.

In his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus essentially explains that he and the Holy Spirit have been sent by the Father to reconcile everything to God. Why? Because God so loves the world.

It's well worth noting that these two readings are very explicit in stating the presence of all three persons of the Trinity; that's why the church uses them on Trinity Sunday.

But there's never a time that God is separated from God. Never. God is one God, not three.

And problems arise when we try to separate, when we try to dissect, the Trinity. When that happens we completely negate the essence of God, we defuse the power of love, we alienate God from God's self.

And alienation is a result of our human brokenness ... but reconciliation is a result of God's wholeness, God's holiness.

For instance, there's a certain theology that I've heard very often around the events of Good Friday. I've often heard it said that as Jesus hung suffering and dying on the cross ... God the Father turned away.

God turned away from Jesus. I can't even imagine such a thing. I think that's one of the greatest blasphemies I've ever heard.

God never turned away from Jesus. God was in Jesus and with Jesus ... on the cross and in the grave. That's the whole point, really. Because God suffered and died, suffering and death have been transformed by the divine presence.

And if it didn't happen that way ... then we're all still dead. As St. Paul says, we Christians would be the most pitiable of fools.

But God loves us so much, so deeply, so relentlessly, that wherever we are that's where God wants to be as well.

Jesus suffered because we suffer. Jesus died because we die. And because Jesus lives forever, we will live forever. The presence of God in our suffering and death have transformed them. It's as simple and as profound as that.

God is with us. Jesus is Emmanuel ... God with us ... not just on Christmas, but also on Good Friday ... and also today ... also every day. Always. God is with us always. Because God so loves the world.

So, here we all are, beloved adopted children of God, participants in the love-life of the Trinity, cherished guests in the very heart of God ... reconciled to God, in Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

And in order to truly tap into the power and the joy of that relationship right now, we need to live in that reality, right now.

We're made in the image of God who is not a concept but a relationship ... a sacred community of self-giving love, a unity of diversity that embraces all ... and excludes none.

Many years ago when I first started working as a nurse in a large homeless shelter in Boston, a man was brought into our clinic in a wheelchair by another staff member.

He was too drunk to walk. And he had apparently fallen down and smashed his head on the hard concrete floor. He was kind of slumped over in the wheelchair, looking and smelling none-too-good, with blood running down his face from a large gash on his forehead.

As I cleaned and bandaged his wound, I tried to strike up a conversation. Mostly to distract him so he wouldn't hit me or anything.

I asked him his name, and he grumbled it at me.

"So what happened?" I asked.

"I fell down ... I'm drunk," he said, stating the obvious.

"Yes you are," I agreed.

"Yeah," he said, "I'm just a piece of trash."

(And he didn't use that particular word.)

"No you're not," I said, "You're not a piece of trash."

(And I didn't use that word either.)

"Oh yeah," he challenged, ... "says who?"

"Says me," I says.

And then a strange thing happened. This man, who had been slumped over and avoiding eye contact with me the whole time, he

suddenly looked up at me. And he kept looking at me, really quite intently. He just looked at me ... and looked, and looked.

And, you know, I just looked back at him, and I smiled. I didn't really know what else to do. Then I finished dressing his wound and sent him on his way, with a pat on the back and a warning to be more careful next time. He did mumble a thank you on his way out.

When I drove home later that night, I thought again about that rather strange encounter. And I wondered again about why he had suddenly looked at me so intently and for such a long time.

And then it dawned on me why. I think that he was trying to see himself through my eyes.

I think he was trying to see himself as I saw him ... not as a piece of trash (or whatever), but as a human being who was worthy of the time and care of another human being.

We all do that, you know. We all see ourselves through the eyes of others. We all allow ourselves to be defined by others ... for better or for worse.

I wonder if God might not be like that as well. I wonder if in the Trinity God sees God's self; God is defined by God's self; God loves God's self. God is given to God and God receives God.

And you and I, who are made in the image of God ...
you and I who are called to be Christ ...
you and I who are empowered by the Holy Spirit,
by the love that rules the universe ...
you and I are called to see one another,
to define one another,

to be given to one another, and to receive one another ...
in love.

In a love that's big enough to hold everyone and everything.

God is not a concept, God is a relationship, a sacred community of
self-giving love, a unity of diversity that embraces all ... and
excludes none.

So is our God ... and so are we called to be. Because God so loves
the world!