

Sermon: What is Truth & What is True

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; John 16:12-15**

Lately, we've been talking a lot about unity, from Jesus' desire for unity among his disciples to the presumed unity between tribes and nations in the twin stories of Babel and the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. But mostly we've heard about our desired unity with God, which is the unity that matters most. Today, we are challenged to think about the unity and *truth* of God through the doctrine of Trinity.

Some years ago, I loaned a book about the Trinity to a friend who had expressed an interest. When he returned the book, he said, "Thank you. That was very interesting. I learned a lot from it, but now I'm thoroughly confused."

And that pretty much sums up how most of us relate to the Trinity as a doctrine, if we think of it at all, because it asks us to understand God in three persons based only on what Scripture tells us, which is not much because Scripture doesn't care about doctrines. Which may be why the church sets aside just one Sunday a year to celebrate just one doctrine.

At the event we call the Last Supper, which was not the last meal, Jesus did a lot of talking, giving the disciples' as much new information as he could because he knew his time was short and he still had many things to say to them. He was especially concerned that they know that he wasn't going to leave them on their own, that he would send the Advocate, the Spirit of truth, to guide them.

But he was also aware of the disciples' limits in how much they could take in at once, especially given the situation as Jesus saw it.

So, he gave them words of hope. They will be cared for after he leaves. He will be present with them through the Spirit of truth. In doing this he shows his love. His life's story is coming to an end and the disciples' life stories, as the church, will continue on.

Christians believe that Jesus is God Incarnate – fully divine yet fully human. Matthew's Gospel quotes Isaiah and names Jesus Emmanuel – God with us – teaching, preaching, and healing people.

This is not an unreasonable belief, given how often the Bible talks about God in this way.

In the psalms alone, we find a variety of images of an incarnate God: God is our refuge; God plants and tends the vineyard; God is a king, warrior, parent, shepherd. The Bible includes metaphors for God's face, hands, mouth, voice, and *breath*. God has always been incarnational.

Jesus calls the Holy Spirit the "Spirit of truth" (16:13). The word *truth* has a personal meaning here. *Truth* in the Hebrew Bible was God; to know the truth or to live in truth meant to live in proper relation to God. So, when Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (14:5), he was claiming divinity and saying that the way to God was through him.¹

When Jesus came before Pontius Pilate, he said, 'I came into this world to testify to the truth,' and Pilate asked, 'What is truth?' (18:37-38)

Jesus was talking about the truth of God's enduring presence, even when we are not necessarily present for God. Jesus was talking about the fullness of God's infinite love that we're not ready to bear because it is awesome and terrifying at the same time. He was talking about a truth Pilate would not have understood, that God is love, and that God lives within us.

As for the doctrine of the Trinity, the Apostle's Creed simply states, 'I believe in the Holy Spirit,' and that's that. God and especially Jesus get a lot more consideration:

I believe in God,
the Father almighty,
Creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.
He was conceived by the power of the *Holy Spirit* and born of the Virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again.
He ascended into heaven,
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit.

That dates from the fifth century. It took that long to form a comprehensive statement about the Trinity, and all they could come up with was, 'I believe in the Holy Spirit.'

One thing they *were* sure about was that the Spirit would guide us into the truth, and into a right relationship with God. It was just too difficult to articulate in a creed.

One thing that people today find unsettling about God is the silence. God created through speech, but now God is silent, at least vocally.

If we read any of the remaining newspapers, or watch television, or listen to the radio or even to podcasts, we can find examples of people speaking *for* God. Political candidates sometimes do this, and they mean well, but they are mostly serving their own interests. Some people want to hear God say the things they want God to say, and that can only lead to trouble.

It may be that God’s perceived silence is intentional. Maybe God is silent in order to get us to listen. Maybe the Spirit is doing its level best to guide us, but we can’t pay attention long enough to find or follow the path. How frustrating for God. On the one hand, we want the truth, but we won’t wait around to get it. Our impatience often gets the better of us.

So, where is the good news in this? What good is a doctrine we can’t fully understand? Who would worship a silent god?

In today’s Gospel passage – in the entire Last Supper discourse, actually – Jesus is looking ahead and thinking of the future when he won’t be with the disciples. So, out of love, he tries to prepare them by telling them everything he can pack in in one evening. But he knows they will need ongoing guidance, as will the communities they will go on to build.

Anyone can acquire lower-case wisdom, the kind of everyday wisdom that helps us in our work or that gets us through the day without falling off a cliff.

But upper-case Wisdom comes from God – in fact, was begotten by God. She was with God at the beginning, and she delights in the human race. She stands at the crossroads and calls to us. Upper-case Wisdom teaches patience to all that live and who will listen.

The Book of Job asks, where can wisdom be found? Where is the place of understanding (Job 28:12)? For Christians in any age, the answer lies in Jesus.

Amen.

¹ Paul L Redditt. “Trinity Sunday: June 6, 2004.” *Lectionary Homiletics* 15, no. 4 (June 2004): 9.

