

Matthew 28:16-20 Holy Trinity Sunday

Welcome to every preacher's favorite Sunday, Holy Trinity, on which, in order to explain succinctly how God can be One and yet Three distinct Persons, we draw on ancient wisdom. I speak, of course, of the animated YouTube video "St. Patrick's Bad Analogies."

If you haven't seen the video, an increasingly frustrated Patrick tries, for the sake of two recent converts, to compare the Trinity to everyday objects, only to be shot down by the supposed yokels for heresy. That's modalism, Patrick!" they cry. "That's Arianism! That's partialism!" The video is hilarious, in a pedantic sort of way.

We like to think of heresies as something slightly scandalous, the way Dan Brown novels portray the Church trying to cover up secret knowledge. But in fact they're generally a lot more boring than that. The heresy of Arianism, for example, claims that Christ and the Holy Spirit aren't God so much as they emanate *from* God. When we say, "begotten, not made," that is a rejection of Arianism.

I'm not going to whack your wrist with a ruler for believing that if you do. The truth is that whenever we talk about God, we are apt to make mistakes. Because we do not, and cannot, understand God fully. And that's OK; we are finite beings with finite brains. And yet, as New Testament scholar Matt Skinner notes: "We are always theologizing." That's you, too. You are theologians, whether you think of yourself that way or not. Whenever we talk about, wrestle with, or imagine who God is and who God is not, we are doing theology. And theology always emerges out of a community's engagement with those questions.

But you'll notice that Jesus in our gospel text is not standing around debating his "substance" or trying to make sure our doctrine is sound. There is a place for that work, there really is, but it's possible to lose the forest for the trees. What Jesus is doing here, in the last paragraphs of Matthew, is giving us our walking papers. And the instructions are really pretty simple. But we have cluttered them up in all kinds of ways that are not part of the script.

To reprise, the eleven remaining disciples follow Jesus' Easter instructions to go back to Galilee. "When they saw him," we are told, "they

worshipped him but they doubted.” Jesus doesn’t send them back to kindergarten or wait until they get the details right. He sends them out, in the middle of their doubt right alongside their worship. That is probably a condition we can relate to. We worship AND we doubt.

Jesus’ answer to this is to point to all of who God is, Source of his authority. He doesn’t exercise this authority he has been given through domination or coercion. Rather, throughout his ministry, Jesus uses his authority to heal the sick, forgive sinners, welcome outcasts, and restore the broken. His authority reveals the heart of God—a heart overflowing with compassion.

Therefore, when Jesus commands his followers to go into the world, he is sending them as ambassadors of that same compassion. The authority behind the mission is the authority of divine love. But also: love takes discipline. [Disciple-> discipline] The many instances of Jesus telling us who we should be loving proves this. We’re supposed to love each other, but also our enemies. We’re supposed to love our neighbors in the same way we are supposed to love ourselves (not one or the other!). We’re supposed to forgive those who have wronged us seventy times seven, and we’re supposed to stand with those who suffer. These instances show no limit or expiration date on love, no exceptions for people who annoy us, or threaten to take away our liberties.

And he announces that this ministry is available to everyone, of all nations. This phrase was revolutionary. In a world divided by ethnicity, religion, status, and nationality, Jesus erased the boundaries that people had built. No nation, race, culture, or social class is excluded from God’s saving love. No gender, age group, or ability.

To obey Jesus means continuing the work. It means refusing to limit God’s love to people who look like us, think like us, vote like us, or live like us. It means seeing every person as someone deeply loved by God.

And so when Jesus tells his followers to *make disciples*, he is specifically NOT saying “convert” them, especially not if conversion is reduced to saying the words “Jesus is Lord” while acting completely contrary to all his teaching. The Great Commission—this is important—is not about finding more church members but building a movement. He is inviting ALL people

into the discipline of love, whether they call themselves Christians or atheists or Pastafarians.

I'll be clear: talk is cheap. The best invitation is to model, as Jesus did, what it means to believe and love, heal and forgive. And I think the goal here, our real theological responsibility, is to both receive and be a conduit for God's mercy. This mercy in every time and place shows us the fullness of the Triune God, existing forever in relationship with Godself, which we can experience without fancy learning or the risk of misrepresentation.

Jesus talks about this obliquely in John, if you remember: "I am in the Father and you in me and I in you" and "I am sending you an Advocate." The Holy Spirit is present in Jesus' own baptism and in yours. And being baptized into the name of this Triune One is to be reminded that we already and always exist in community, that full humanity, in Matthew Myer Boulton's words, is "never in the singular, never merely 'I' or 'me'; it's always in the plural, always 'us' and 'we.'"

Because God is always deeply, irreducibly relational, we too have a responsibility to others—and the assurance that we are never alone. This co-mission that we are given would be impossible without God's presence. Loving isn't always easy. Extending mercy to people who have wronged us does not come naturally. Crossing barriers and serving others often requires courage and sacrifice. And always, we are sent out in our faith *and* in our doubt.

But God goes with you. The One who calls you to love is with you. The One who commands mercy supplies mercy. The One who sends you into the world walks beside you. Christ's presence, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, empowers you to become people whose lives reflect the whole heart of God. Amen.