

Trinity Sunday

The Rev. Este Gardner Cantor

Holy Trinity / La Santisima Trinidad / Good Shepherd

[Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31](#), [Romans 5:1-5](#), [John 16:12-15](#)

5/30/10

Today is Trinity Sunday and often, on Trinity Sunday we hear the ancient hymn, *I bind unto myself today the strong name of the Trinity, the three in one, the one in three*. Whenever Trinity Sunday comes around, I have to stop and ask, “Just what are we binding ourselves unto?” Well, the truth is, we don’t really know. The truth is, none of us really knows exactly what God is, let alone what the Trinity is. All of us, in this sense are agnostic. So in a sense to try to explain God, even through the time honored and holy persons of the trinity is a little dangerous. God is the unexplainable mystery—Job’s whirlwind. As God tells us through the words of Isaiah, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are my ways your ways. “ So how can we understand her, triune or not? But we can ponder. We can ponder anew.

Gregory of Nyssa, his brother Basil and their friend Gregory of Nazianzus were desert monks in the 4th century who greatly helped in the understanding (or impossibility of really understanding) the Trinity. They warned their initiates against striving for a clear understanding of the Triune God. Instead of struggling to understand what they deemed was a holy mystery, initiates were encouraged to keep their minds swinging back and forth between the one and the three.¹ Gregory of Nazianzus writes:

No sooner do I conceive of the One, than I am illumed by the splendor of the three. No sooner do I distinguish Three than I am carried back to the one. When I think of any of the three I think of him as the Whole and my eyes are filled, and the greater part of what I am thinking escapes me. I cannot grasp the greatness of that One so as to attribute a greater greatness to the rest. When I see the three together, I see but one torch, and cannot divine or measure the undivided light.²

¹ The Case for God: Karen Armstrong

² Gregory of Nazianzus, Oratorio 29:6-20. Quoted in Armstrong, the Case for God.

Before I went to seminary I was very comfortable with the idea of God, but very uncomfortable with the idea of Jesus. After 6 years of seminary, I found that I was very comfortable with the idea of Jesus, but uncomfortable with the idea of God. I didn't think of it much then, but I guess I had always been most comfortable with the idea of the Holy Spirit—or maybe the Great Spirit.

I used to think of God through the lens of Lakota Sioux spirituality: MITAKUYE OYASIN, which is Sioux for “All my Relations.” In other words, God is truly all-encompassing. All creatures are our relations and are all part of God with us. There really was nowhere that God did not touch, and the why and wherefores of what God did and did not do were a huge mystery, not to be too deeply plumbed.

Then I read about process theology and I read Rabbi Harold Kushner's book “Why Bad Things Happen to Good People.” Rabbi Kushner came to a new conclusion about God when his young child died of cancer. He could not reconcile the God he loved with anyone who would allow such a thing to happen. He described his new philosophy like this:

A 707 crashed into a bridge in Washington DC—that was physics. But when Maury Schmutnick, who had never had a heroic thought in his life, jumped into the river to save a drowning stewardess, that's God. A Christian perspective might have called it the Holy Spirit. This explanation of what seemed to be God's unexplainable foibles initially appealed to me.

But as time went on, I realized that Rabbi Kushner's idea of God was too easy an answer. I felt it was wrong to put God in a box, that God in fact was the very definition of “out of the box.” And maybe that is the true value of the Trinity—it keeps God out of the box. As I pondered this, a phrase I heard somewhere kept coming back to me: “Do you praise God only when the hurricanes do not blow?”

Or do you embrace and say yes to creation in all its wildness? Is that not at least one definition of faith? Around this time one of my influences was a kind of an out-of-the-box priest who was at the time serving (for free) as vicar of a small church in Oakland.

Right after the great tragedy of the Tsunami title waves in Indonesia in 2004, I asked him:

“How do you reconcile the reality of that scale of devastation with the idea of a loving God?” He said, “God gives the plates of the earth’s crust the freedom to be plates of the earth’s crust. They then do what plates of the earth’s crust do—they shift.” He challenged me to imagine a world in which creation did not have this freedom. An utterly ordered world with no death, never any chaos, no wildness—no wilderness.

In the book of Job God speaks out of the whirlwind. He speaks of the glories of creation; the unfathomable complexity and power of that God-made creation, and man’s arrogance in thinking he can comprehend or control it.

Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements, surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?”

God speaks of the great power of the Leviathan, the sea monster whose creation is noted in Genesis.

Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook? Put a rope in its nose or pierce its jaw with a hook?

Will it make a covenant to be your servant forever?

These wonders are a mystery I don’t want to analyze or mess with—the great and truly unfathomable whirlwind that is the glory of God. But I do believe that when we are sheltered and nourished and even when we are challenged by God’s exquisite creation, this is the purest form of God’s love for us.

Predictably, Fr. Matthew Fox, author of “Creation Spirituality,” doesn’t want to mess with the mystery of God in Creation either. He just wants to glory in it. He sees the

ecstasy of the Trinity, in perhaps a different but just as powerful way as those initiates of the Cappadocian Fathers. He glories in Creation and in the mystery of the Holy Spirit, while pointing out the Jesus-centric tendencies of conventional Christianity. He was once confronted by an impatient listener at a lecture he gave in Australia. "I hear you speak of the Cosmic Christ," the man said. Well, are you a Christian or not? Do accept Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior or not?"³

Fox replied, "I am a Trinitarian Christian. Those who think that Christianity is exclusively about Jesus are in fact heretics. They deny the Trinitarian Divinity."

He later accuses many Christians of what he calls Jesusolatry. He goes on:

"To zero in on redemption of sin only, is anthropocentric and leaves out the mystical experience we have of God in creation and of the Spirit in our world. Then he adds that it leaves out what he calls the Cosmic Christ, the Cosmic Wisdom that was present before the creation of the world (which we heard about in proverbs 8) who was incarnated in Jesus (Jn 1:14) and whom Jesus promises to send as spirit." As it says in our Gospel reading of today.

Perhaps it is even more important to see what the Trinity leads to than what it actually means. Matthew Fox's idea of the Cosmic Christ comes from the brilliant and radical Catholic theologian Father Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, whose writings were banned by the Catholic Church. He seems to think that what it all leads to his idea of the Cosmic Christ, and he places humankind itself as one with Christ in the Trinity. According to Teilhard de Chardin, Christ is the force behind a collective "Christ consciousness" of humankind, which will culminate in the emergence of a "Cosmic Christ" —the true parousia, or presence. Teilhard de Chardin essentially taught that the whole world itself was being transubstantiated into Christ. Is that cool or what!

Since the word "Trinity" never appears in the bible, on this Trinity Sunday, the lections are selected, as best they can be to reflect the idea of the Trinity.

Our wonderful reading of Proverbs today, that Matthew Fox alluded to, could indeed be said to reflect his concept of the Cosmic Christ, imparting wisdom, and

³ Creation Spirituality, Matthew Fox, p. 55

understanding, and existing, just as “the Word” did in the prolog of John, before the beginnings of the earth. She seems to be at all places at once, in the present time as well as the past. She is, all at once:

...on the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads, at the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals.

And at every stage of creation, Wisdom was working alongside God the creator. As she says,

Then I was the craftsman at God’s side.
I was filled with delight day after day,
rejoicing always in the presence of God,
Rejoicing in the whole world and in all humankind.

We need the wilderness, we need wildness of creation, but the majesty and the glory and the fearful mystery of God is too much for us. I guess that’s why we need the Trinity—we need the humanity of Jesus and the soft transcendence of the Spirit.

But if we truly have a have a triune God, whether or not we can grasp the three in one, then we must have something astounding. We have all the vastness and wildness and unpredictability of God the Creator. But we also, in the same being, have the human compassion, forgiveness and redeeming love of Jesus. And we have the mystery of the Holy Spirit, channeling that love and power through us, if we will allow it, like a great ecstatic river. Amen.