

I am guessing that most of you are probably like me, in terms of what occupies your mind most of the time. Generally, I'm thinking about small scale things.....what to plant in the vegetable garden this year, or what to wear for the ever-changing Minnesota weather; things of that sort. So if you're like me in this way, Sunday worship is *always* pushing us to up our game, to turn our minds towards a larger scale of wondrous and often unseen realities--realities extending to a realm beyond choosing whether to plant green beans or peas, or whether to wear a windbreaker or a sweatshirt, to a realm with far-reaching realities like God, grace, community, sin, mercy. And today, that step up during Sunday worship is particularly steep. Because this is the Festival of the Holy Trinity; the only Sunday in the entire Church Year when we focus on a doctrine rather than on a Scriptural story. Stories tend to involve colorful details we can grasp; doctrine is all about abstraction and ideas. So, this morning we're thinking about the very nature of God, and that's outside the box thinking, stretching-our-imaginations thinking. It's a challenge, without a doubt, but a challenge certainly worth undertaking; because the Triune God is the primary and defining doctrine of the Christian faith. And where better to give it some deep thought than here in Sunday morning worship?

How *do* we, as Christians, understand the doctrine of the Trinity? The Trinity is that puzzling doctrine that defies mathematics by claiming that there is one God, revealed in three persons, traditionally described as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Or sometimes described as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Or even as Parent, Savior, and Holy Presence. The point is, we're working with three and one here in a way that can be confusing. The doctrine is developed *after* the Scriptural books have been written, as an attempt by the early church to *wrestle* with the nature of God as revealed through Christ and in the Scripture. That being the case, it shouldn't surprise us that we may *also* wrestle with this doctrine *ourselves*.

Since any attempt to describe the nature of God will necessarily fall short, we can ever and always as theologians simply do the best we humanly can. We usually attempt to explain the Trinity by using metaphors or images. Whatever metaphor we choose will contain truth, but it will also fall short; that's the nature of trying to describe the undesirable. So, we say, for example, that one person can fill many roles, while remaining one

person, and yet each of those roles is significant. On this Senior Recognition Sunday, let's think about our graduating senior, A.J. Mattson. He's a son to his parents; a sibling to his sister; a friend to his peers. He's been a high school student, he's now a graduate and moving on to his next phase of life....one person, many roles, and each role is significant, and matters. This could be said of any graduating senior, but of any of us too, of course. *All* of us play many roles, are in differing types of relationships with others, while yet remaining oneself.

This is a metaphor that can be helpful as we consider the Trinity: one God, many roles, or at least *three* roles that we recognize: Creator. Savior. Spirit. Yet still one God. But while we can understand reasonably easily that one person plays many roles, it's a little harder to get a hold of this whole concept of *God* playing three roles. Like, how can we say we worship *One* God, when we identify *three* persons within the Godhead? (That certainly makes us look like we're *not* monotheists to those neighbor faiths which share the Old Testament with us, Jews and Moslems.) The Trinity is a challenging concept. We can't fully understand it; we certainly can't manage it. And maybe that's the point. God is *beyond* our understanding and management. Because I'm thinking the reality of the Triune God does two very important things for us: it points us to God as *Mystery*, and it describes God as *relational*. God's *mystery* is celebrated in our lesson from Isaiah and God's *relationality* in our lesson from Romans.

First then, Isaiah furthers our understanding of the transcendence and mystery of God, of the majesty of God, in fact. Scholars suspect that Isaiah was already a fledgling religious leader in the Jewish temple at the time of his vision, recorded in Isaiah 6. Due to the length of his prophetic ministry, it would seem he was still a relatively young man at the time of his calling. This again reminds me of AJ, particularly because the remarkable thing about this young Isaiah was his willingness to serve: when God calls for someone willing to undertake a challenging act of service on behalf of others at the end of our lesson, Isaiah basically says, "Pick me! I'm all in!" Likewise, AJ is a young man undertaking service to others through the (Air National Guard,) a calling both challenging and significant. The willingness of the young to give back, to serve God or others is certainly inspiring, both in our lesson and in our reality. Isaiah, like AJ, like our other teens, like our

confirmands, like our children, is a great reminder to us that God works through young and old alike, and no one is too young or old to be about God's work.

Returning to Isaiah and our lesson, it seems his vision may have taken place within a temple worship service. The Temple was a monumental structure, lacking perhaps the cozy quality of our church building, but having instead the grandeur of Greek and Roman temples. Isaiah gazes upon the ark of the covenant enthroned in the temple with the smoke of the incense surrounding it. Looking at these earthly symbols, Isaiah is suddenly given a vision of the divine realities which they represent. He sees heaven and angels and God. God is enthroned and just the hem of God's robe fills the Temple. God, in other words, is *huge*. 6-winged Seraphs are in attendance upon God, singing praises. This is a vision of the immensity and holiness of God, and Isaiah is overcome not by *delight*, but terror and guilt! God's holiness is so foreign and so other, that he becomes painfully aware of his sin and inadequacies and feels unworthy and afraid. We are not, in our times, very fond of the phrase, "the fear of God", because we want to love God, not fear God. But of course, there *must* be something fearsome about a God of this might and power and holiness, and the Trinity reminds us of God's transcendence and majesty. This matters because it helps us put ourselves into a proper perspective of humility before God, to recognize that God isn't our personal assistant smart device that does whatever we ask, whenever we ask it. God is not there for us to project our wants onto and then become irritable when the results aren't forthcoming. The doctrine of the Trinity, by supporting the mystery, the holiness, and the unfathomability of God, reminds us that God is beyond, above, amongst, and within us---but *not* within our management or control or even our complete understanding.

And yet.....and yet the profound mystery of this mysterious God and of our faith, is that this transcendent and majestic God is all about *relationships*---both within God's self, in terms of being Triune—but also with us. At our lectio group on Tuesday, one of the participants made a really beautiful intuitive leap between this lesson from Isaiah and a story of Jesus within the Gospels. As noted earlier, in this lesson from Isaiah, we hear that the mere hem of God's robe filled the Temple; an image of awe and transcendence. But in the Gospels, there is that poignant story where a woman who has suffered hemorrhages for decades is healed

when she fights her way through a crowd to simply touch the hem of Christ's robe. Very likely a rough, peasant garment, a hem far removed from the grandeur of Isaiah's vision, and yet the hem of the robe worn by our Incarnate Lord, and touching it brought healing to this humble, long-suffering woman. How stunning a contrast there is between God's magnificence and God's humble availability to heal this peasant woman, all expressed in the hem of a robe; that's the *mystery* of our Triune God; both transcendent, but also so very near at hand, and in relationship with us.

That *relationality* of the Triune God is what Paul writes about in our lesson from Romans. I've already mentioned that the word Trinity is never used, nor the doctrine fully developed, within Scripture. But while the Trinity is not named or defined within this passage, St. Paul *does* make reference to the three persons of the Trinity here. He writes about the Spirit of God—the Third Person of the Trinity He describes God as Abba or Father, the First Person of the Trinity. And he refers to Christ as our sibling and joint heir of God's grace, the Second Person of the Trinity. Without elaborating on how he understands these persons or aspects of God to be related, St. Paul names them and tells us that God is relation to both God's self and with us. The amazing thing about the Triune God is that it describes for us a God Who is not hierarchal or rigid, but rather *relational*: The Creator, Savior, and Spirit-- One God--exist in a kind of mutuality of oneness and three-ness at the same time; there is love, balance, movement within our Triune God, a quality that our sermon song describes as the "dance of Trinity". And this same love and mutuality that defines God's own self is extended to us. We are God's *children*, St. Paul declares to us. And the use of the Aramaic word "Abba" further reminds us that this parent-child relationship is not stiff and formal, but intimate and warm---because "Abba" is probably best translated as "Papa". This isn't an angry parent holding us at arm's length and looking to criticize; this is a loving Papa—or Mama—who finds us lovable and delightful and looks to bring blessings and grace into our lives. The Triune nature of God expresses for us that God's very nature is to be in loving relationship, including with us.

And knowing this about God, might point us in the direction our own discipleship should take....because God is *relational*. So are *we*. To be made in God's image, as Scripture asserts, means that we are also meant to be in relationship to others, and like God—we are to be in relationships not of hierarchy, but

mutuality. This way of speaking of our Triune God is challenging, but it's good for us to flex our mental and spiritual muscle and to be theologians at times; to *think* about the nature of God. When we do, I think we recognize that the Holy Trinity describes something of the Transcendence and Mystery of God, *and* something about how that Transcendent Mystery is in relationship with us. Maybe instead of trying to analyze the doctrine, we might claim it and celebrate it and look to live it out in our own way of relating to others, as the hymn we're about to sing does: "Come, join the dance of Trinity". Amen.