

The Trinity and the Web of the Universe
II Corinthians 13:11-13; Matthew 28:16-20
Trinity, First Sunday after Pentecost, (June 16), 2019
Kyle Childress

You know it's all about God, don't you?

How much do you think about or talk about God? I don't mean talking about church or ministries and mission in the wider community. I don't even mean talking about the Bible. I mean God.

One of my good friends attended a few years ago the inauguration of the Will Campbell Lectures at the University of Mississippi delivered by Duke's Stanley Hauerwas. When the lecture concluded, my friend and several clergy-friends of different denominations went over to the house of the Episcopal priest, and sat for two or three hours talking about God. They didn't talk about who was at the lecture. They didn't talk shop, which for preachers means talking about church problems and challenges. They talked about God.

Do you ever talk about God when you go home on Sunday?

You know, of course, that God is the reason we're here. It's why we are here to worship and why we are even in existence as a church. Everything we do – from making prayer quilts to caring for the Earth to racial justice to feeding the hungry to raising children and more – is because of God. The Living God. The God who created the heavens and the Earth, the God we know in Jesus Christ who died on a

cross and was resurrected after three days, the God we know through the Holy Spirit who provides our very breath each moment we're alive.

My old mentor and hero, Baptist preacher Will Campbell was the only white person in the room when Dr. King organized the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in Jan. 1957. Will escorted the Little Rock Nine students in Sept. 1957 into Little Rock's Central High School, and was the only white person present in May of 1960 at Shaw University in Raleigh, NC when the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was organized. In 1962 he wrote about his work, "In a real sense [the hu]man is not the subject, the point of reference for his own well-being and happiness upon the earth. Neither the racist nor the person upon whom he casts indignity, the disinherited, Negro or white, the builder of houses or rejected from houses, the employer or the one deprived of employment, the passer of legislation or the victim of repressive legislation, the murderer or the murdered – none of these is the true referent, the subject. The only point of reference is God" (*Race and the Renewal of the Church*, p. 53).

It's all about God. We're all about God.

Which raises another question: which God? You've heard me say many times that the Bible does not spend any time worrying over if God exists or not. But the Bible is very concerned about which God exists. What kind of God do we worship is of fundamental importance in the Bible, to our faith, and the well being of the entire planet.

Martin Luther wrote, "It is the trust and faith of the heart alone that make both God and an idol. If your faith and trust are right, then your God is the true

one. Conversely, where your trust is false and wrong, there you do not have the true God... Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God” (Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, “The First Part: The Ten Commandments”).

Show me what or whom you trust and I’ll show you what or whom you worship. I’ll show you which God you trust. This is why idolatry is the root cause of sin – we worship, trust, and give ourselves to false gods and everything else follows. We see the world falsely. We desire falsely. We act falsely, all because we worship the wrong god.

The Bible is full of stories of idolatry: the Golden Calf in Exodus 32, Baal in I Kings 18, Nebuchadnezzar’s giant gold statue of himself in Daniel 3, and on and on.

Lest you think idolatry is some quaint worshiping of primitive statues, last year when we celebrated our church’s 50th anniversary, we had some former members who hung around until the end of the day, eager to engage Jane and myself in debate. He made little barbed comments all weekend about our “No Guns” signs at our entrances and on that Sunday after everyone else had left he emphatically made it clear that he did not like them because he was a big-time gun carrier. He confronted Jane about why didn’t we permit guns in the church and she told him because we followed Jesus, the Prince of Peace. About that time, I walked out and he quickly challenged me over the Second Amendment, the right to bear arms. I told him very simply that we take the First and Second Commandments more seriously than the Second Amendment (reminder: the first two commandments are You shall have no other gods before me and You shall not

make or worship idols.) In other words, I was saying to him that trusting in guns is idolatry.

It's all about God and which God makes all the difference.

I have permission to tell this story. Last year Judy McDonald attended a civic club Christmas luncheon in which a leading pastor delivered the message. His Christmas message was about how God the Father was a wrathful God and would hold us accountable for our sins but only the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross saved us from God's wrath. Jesus' death paid the price of our sin to keep God the Father's anger from consuming us.

Nice Christmas message. Several people gathered around Judy afterwards asking her what she thought of the message. She said, "I'm a Trinitarian Christian. I believe the three persons of the Trinity are always loving and always giving in perfect communion with each other. God is not in competition with God-self."

Sounds like a pretty good answer to me.

Today we celebrate and teach about the God known to us as Trinity. It makes all the difference that this is the God we worship rather than something or someone else. This is the God we know as a loving Father or Parent who created us, as the loving Son who gave himself for us, and as a loving Spirit who empowers, gives us strength, guides us, comforts us, and challenges us. One God, three persons is how the church has talked about it, holding in tension the mystery of always One God and always three persons. Not three mini-gods, in isolation from one another – One God. Not one God with a white beard sitting on a throne in

heaven giving orders to Christ, who in turn gives them to the Spirit who rushes out of heaven carrying out the orders.

My favorite way the church has talked about this Triune God is the analogy of *perichoresis*, a Greek word from which we get words like choreography. It has to do with dance. The analogy is that the three persons of the Trinity are in perfect communion, perfect relationship, and are perfectly and eternally moving, dancing in a circle with and within each other, receiving one another in perfect hospitality and giving of one another in perfect love, while also turning outward to receive and give. No subordination, no hierarchy but complete and perfect mutuality of vitality and movement. Furthermore, there is such self-giving and receiving love that this God of eternal movement creates, redeems, and sustains the universe.

The great poet Dante Alighieri gets at this better than anyone in his *Divine Comedy* when soaring through the upper reaches of the heavens the character Dante asks if he might glimpse the Godhead and live to tell about it (*Paradiso*, 33.1-39). He sees light and there is music and movement, as all the heavens are dancing, there are three circles of the same circumference with distinct though unspecified colors. One circle appears as the reflection of the other (Son and Father), and the third circle (Spirit) looks like fire breathed equally by the other two (33.115-45). It is an image of vitality and joy and movement.

Contrast this with Dante's description of Hell where at the very bottom everything is frozen in eternal ice – no movement, no change, no joy, and no hope.

“God in Three Persons, perfect Trinity” is how the hymn “Holy, Holy, Holy” puts it. Genesis 1:26 says, “Then God said, ‘Let *us* make humankind in *our*

image, according to *our* likeness.” We humans are created in the image of this Triune God. We are made for relationship and community with God, with one another, and with all creation. When Jesus came, he called disciples to follow him, not only as solitary individuals but as a community and within that community they learned how to be reconciled and forgiven, how to love and how to serve as they watched Jesus reconcile, forgive, love and serve. Then through Jesus death and resurrection, by the blood of the cross the dividing walls were broken down (Ephesians 2:13-14). Furthermore, the Spirit empowered those Christians to be one body and share all things in common so there was no one in need (Acts 2:43-47; 4:32-35). And the rest of the book of Acts tells of the eternal Triune God who is always receiving and loving, empowering the church to reach out, embracing those previously considered outside of God’s love and grace.

We are created in God’s image, redeemed and set free from the bondage that isolates us and divides us from God and each other and creation, and empowered to be a body of believers who together worship and live out the Way of this Triune God.

Part of what we learn to do is be alert to seeing evidences of this God we worship in the world around us. For example, in physics, the more we learn about how the universe works, the more we can see evidence of this Triune God, the God of relationship and connection.

The old Newtonian universe placed emphasis on the individual. The atom is the building block of the cosmos, in isolation from other individual atoms. In the human universe, then, nations, communities, churches and families are reducible to the individuals who make them up. We are human beings are reducible to the

individual organs of our bodies. The whole can be fixed by repairing the individual parts, and the whole is simply the sum of its parts.

Yet quantum physics say it is not a clockwork universe in which individuals function as discrete springs and gears, but one that looks more like a luminous web in which the whole is far more than the parts. Like a web, if you tug on one part, it affects the whole web. In this universe there are no such things as parts that form the whole, but the whole of the universe is the fundamental unity of reality. The whole is in everything. Everything is connected.

Physicist Werner Heisenberg said, “The common division of the world into subject and object, inner and outer world, body and soul is no longer adequate.”

We live in a universe that seems to be connected in some way. Everything, from the largest to the smallest, is somehow related. And quantum physics says it all moves, not at the speed of light, but faster than the speed of light.

Quantum physics sounds more and more like Dante, the poet reflecting on the God we worship known as Trinity.

Which God we worship makes a difference. Is God like old Newton’s where the absolute value was the solitary, atomized individual? Or is God the Trinity of perfect community, perfect relationship of movement and light, giving and receiving in perfect love, mutuality, hospitality, and joy?

Jesus calls us at the end of Matthew’s Gospel, “Go and make disciples everywhere, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded. And remember, I am with you always, even until the end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20). What if

our calling is not about standing on the street corners preaching or passing out tracts as it is going out and helping create and form community and relationships of mutuality and love in the name of the Trinitarian God we worship and follow? What would economics look like in Nacogdoches that was built more on a Trinitarian model of sharing and love, rather than a model of competition and exploitation? What if my business was built to serve my neighbor, more than it was to make a dollar off of the solitary individual who might come in? Because of the God who created the person across town, Jesus who died for him, and the Holy Spirit who brings us together, might we nurture a different kind of town?

Other gods engender other ways. From looking around, it looks as if our lives are built upon gods of mistrust, fear, and division, guns and force, racist hierarchy, destruction and exploitation of creation, and domination. Advocates say it is the way of order and peace. Let's not be confused. At the bottom of hell, there is order and peace. Nothing moves. Nothing changes. Everything is in its place.

But there is another way. The Jesus Way. The Way of the God we know as Trinity.

We worship this Triune God and then we are called to go out of this door and share this Trinitarian Way.

Ted Wardlaw, the President of Austin Seminary, once shared about an old Presbyterian church in Dallas with a worn out building AND enough money to build a new one. The new building was all modern and airy and built out of limestone. But the congregation found a way to incorporate the stunning Tiffany stained-glass windows from their original structure. There was one window that was particularly captivating because of its size and its message. In the original

building, it had taken up most of the chancel wall-- a larger-than-life image of Jesus the Good Shepherd with his arms outstretched and beneath him the words, "Come to me, all you who labor." Generations of people were greeted by that invitation as they came into that old sanctuary. But when they built the new building, they did some serious theological thinking about that window and they put it not in the front but in the back, so that now, when worship is over, it soars over the narthex of that church, through which people go back out into the world. They go beneath the outstretched arms of Christ with the call: "Come to me, all you who labor."

Let's go. And we go ...

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.