

“Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit” a sermon on the Trinity

The Rev. Keenan Colton Kelsey, Noe Valley Ministry Presbyterian Church, June 11, 2006

Romans 8:12-17 So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—<sup>13</sup>for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. <sup>14</sup>For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. <sup>15</sup>For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” <sup>16</sup>it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, <sup>17</sup>and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

Who IS this God we worship? How do we explain, to ourselves and to others, the very nature of God, the intrinsic essence of God? One way we do it is with the doctrine of the Trinity.

However, preaching on Trinity is fraught with dangers: We could get lousy in church history; we could get lost in abstract concepts of God or shallow metaphors of trinity; or perhaps most alarming, we could get lost talking about God and forgetting what God actually cares about: us, our lives, our relationships, our world.

But this doctrine was not created by some monks trying to write a best seller like *Dan Brown*, nor in a Council of theologians trying to placate an impatient Emperor. It was imposed upon ordinary Jewish fishermen, because the God they had worshiped in the temple, Isaiah’s God, had somehow become personal and intimate in the actions and presence of Jesus. And as we heard last week, when Jesus left, they experienced, in a transforming moment, the gift of power, joy, hope and courage – and then it felt very much like Jesus was still with them.

So today, I want to resist the temptation to talk about the Council of Nicea and the heresies of the early church. Let’s abandon the abstract symbolism of triangles or intersecting circles or three forms of water or three legged stools; and let’s turn our backs on discussions of *homoousia* and *perichoresis*.

Let’s turn instead what Paul tells us what the Trinitarian nature of God actually means in our lives. Let’s talk about impact and obligation. Let’s hear a story.

This is not a particularly gripping story. In fact it is a fairly minor story in the scheme of things – but, as Dave Barry would say, I’m not making it up! And it does tell us something about the everyday struggle to respond to the Trinitarian nature of God.

Tommy Montrose opened his store, *Rephibia*, in Florida about 25 years ago. It’s a pet store, but the only furry mammals there are feeder mice! Instead, when you walk in you see an 18 foot python, monitor lizards bigger than most dogs, frogs the size of dinner plates, and a snapper turtle resembling Jabba the Hut!

This Christmas Eve, the breezes blew in a ruffled guy who wanted to buy a python snake. Not the 18 foot one, but perhaps that 7 foot one in the long tank. He had always wanted a python and he finally figured out that the way to get one, was to give it to his wife as a present for Christmas. The customer had convinced himself that his wife will love it, and because snakes like to hide in tight dark places, he would wrap it in a box and it would stay happy and content until Christmas morning.

Tommy needed this sale. He was up against sagging business, increased upkeep, an unpaid mortgage. In the tradition of all good Christmas Eve stories, this customer was a Godsend. So Tommy shook his head, said a prayer, and sent the snake home.

The man waits until his wife is asleep, puts the box under the tree, and goes to bed. A little before 3 AM the wife hears a crash. She grabs the flashlight and goes down to investigate. She freezes when she sees the Christmas tree knocked down. She senses movement, and then, in the flashlight beam, she sees a triangle head with unblinking slits for eyes and the flickering of a forked tongue. The head is disturbingly large! As it turns out, the heat from the lights on the tree raised the blood temperature of the snake so that it became active. It didn't wait for Christmas morning.

Back at *Rephibia*, Tommy comes into the store as he does every day, including Christmas, to take care of the animals. He is surprised to see so many blinking message lights on his answering machine. Guess what, they are all from the one man who has been calling every 15 minutes since 3 AM! Seems he wants to return the snake before his marriage completely disintegrates!

What is Tommy to do? The sales slip emphatically states *No Returns*. The zoo has been known to take such unwanted snakes, and this being Florida, Tommy knows that a lot of people simply let their animals go. And truly, Tommy needs the money. But Tommy is in many ways a boy who never outgrew his snake phase, and his animals are his passion. The simple truth is, he cares about them. And in caring, there is an obligation. He takes the snake back.

Like Tommy, we have an obligation. The reality of Trinity imposes an obligation. According to the dictionary, obligation carries ideas of being constrained, bound, compelled, even indebted. Synonyms include accountability, burden, and commitment. It is Paul's word in Romans, and although Paul doesn't say to what we are obligated, the context is clear. We are obligated to God, the one who made us in her image and created us for infinite good. Our God became human. And in that humanness Jesus felt our struggle and showed us, called us, to live in a new way. And then, at Pentecost, God blew into our life empowering us for that participation; we are obliged to not just believe, but to act upon our beliefs. Paul unequivocally states that having the Spirit of the Risen Christ dwelling within us enables us to live as the people of God rather than as slaves to the value system of the world around us, the value system of the dominant culture. That certainly restricts choices and limits possibilities. It will narrow our path. But it will assuredly lead to a better richer fuller happier more productive more healthy and more loving life.

Don't you sometimes get tired of that obligation? Don't you occasionally try to carve out some place where God isn't, some place where we are in charge, where it's just about us, where *we* can be solitary, unitary. I know that I try to save some space where I can be just, you know, a little alienated, a little mean, a little callous, a little greedy—like driving my car, or when I spend money, or in the voting booth, or in my choice of vacation, or whom I'll love, and when I'll love... Or maybe we're ok with God in that personal stuff, but when it comes to globalization, God, we don't need your messing with us in concepts of jubilee and justice. When it comes to the Middle East, we don't need your telling us about forgiveness and reconciliation. When it comes to prisoners of war or torture tactics, we resist that call to release the captive. When it comes to illegal immigrants, your call to hospitality is inconvenient, actually uncomfortable. O God, we don't need your claim on us all the time!

But we did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear but we have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry "Abba! Papa!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God... We are children of God all the time—dang!—children of the God, who will not let us down, or let us go, or let us off. Fear too often drives personal and political decisions around the world. But Paul says what Jesus said, "Fear Not! God does not come to us in Pentecost only to leave us hanging out by ourselves to face tomorrow alone. To use the words of the great Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, this is a God who is not only with us, but who is for us as well.

Because always, along with the obligation, there is the promise. The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity is not just a matter of words. It's a matter of the heart, it's a matter of the mind, it's a matter of who God is and who God is...for you! For God "*so loved the world*" so as to enter into our world in the person of Jesus Christ in order to love us as one of us. And the Spirit of God is upon us and in us. If Christ is not God, then we do not touch the living Spirit of God in the lives of the people we love... nor in the lives of the poor, nor in the lives of those with whom we worship nor in the lives of those with whom we strive to build a better world. On dark nights when you wonder if your life has any meaning and purpose, wonder instead about the height, the breadth, the depth of God's love and know that you were created for abundance and goodness, that you can never fall outside the out-stretched arms of Christ, that the Spirit is only a breath away.

We must sometimes sigh, as surely as Tommy sighed, and be sad that our fantasies, our immediate hopes and desires, did not work out this time. Tommy actually thought the Christmas eve customer just might offer a good home to the python. It did not happen. So instead of turning his back, saying it's not my problem, instead of being angry or resentful, he opens the doors and takes back the snake.

What was Paul trying to tell us in the passage from Romans? Listen to the same reading as translated by Eugene Peterson in the Message: *So don't you see that we don't owe this old do-it-yourself life one red cent. There's nothing in it for us, nothing at all. The best thing to do is give it a decent burial and get on with your new life. God's Spirit beckons. There are things to do and places to go! This resurrection life you received from God is*

*not a timid, grave-tending life. It is adventurously expectant, greeting God with a childlike "What's next, Papa?" God's Spirit touches our spirits and confirms who we really are. We know who she is, and we know who we are: parent and child. And we know we are going to get what's coming to us—an unbelievable inheritance! We go through exactly what Christ goes through. If we go through the hard times with him, then we're certainly going to go through the good times with him!*

May it be so. In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, Amen.