

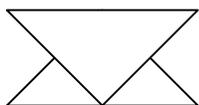
Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL
June 15, 2014

Sermon by Rev. Gloria Hopewell, D.Min.
Texts: Genesis 1; 2:1-4a, Psalm 8, 2 Corinthians, & Matthew

Precisely 1,000 years ago, one millennium ago, in 1014 CE, the church in Rome, part of the Western branch of the One Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, began to use a slightly different form of the Nicene Creed. One that had just three additional words. Fourteen years later, in 1054 CE, these three words were part of what caused the Great Schism that separated the Christian East from the West forming what is still today the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Western Church now made up of Roman Catholics, Anglicans and those Protestants who recognize the ancient creeds as the statement of basic beliefs about God.

Would you be surprised to know that what we will say together today still includes those three words? Even though in 1978 and again in 1988 the Lambeth Conference—the world wide Bishops of the Anglican Communion—recommend their deletion? And that the 1994 General Convention agreed that they be deleted in the next revision of the *Book of Common Prayer*? Of course, such revision has not been forthcoming, though in the approved trial series, *Enriching Our Worship*, there is a lengthy footnote about this change.

Do you know what these three words are? Would you like to? They are not “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”—that’s more than three words, anyway. No, they are “and the Son.” This is known in Latin as the *filioque* clause. It describes the source of the Holy Spirit and, affects the Spirit’s role in the Trinity. You see, the original words, from the first two Ecumenical Councils in the fourth century said this: “we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father.” The changed words, those in our *Book of Common Prayer* are “who proceeds from the Father and the Son.” So, it would look something like this:



Father

Father

Son

Son

Spirit

Spirit

For some, this would make the three persons of the Trinity less equal, the Holy Spirit seemingly derivative of the Father and the Son. It is, of course, more complicated than that. Add to this the fact that the change was made in a local Council—in Spain—rather than at an Ecumenical Council where all the Bishops were included. A serious issue--enough to have contributed to the split of the Church.

I mention this story to illustrate the nature of our creeds and doctrines on this Trinity Sunday. This is the only day of the year that is not about the teachings of Jesus, not about the stories of Israel, not even fully about the witness and growth of the first century church, though the readings appointed for the day all give hints of this three-in-one God. No, today we confront a concept, a mystery, an irrational, incomprehensible model handed down in church tradition that shows up in our worship not just in our weekly recitation of the Creed—but in our hymns and doxologies, our prayers, our baptismal liturgy, our benedictions and blessings.

It's important for us to remember that our creeds and doctrines did not simply spring forth full blown at one identifiable time or place. There were no stone tablets. No heavenly voice speaking them into being. No, they evolved over time and out of what people had come to believe long before the Ecumenical Councils in the 4th century and beyond. It is likely that the idea of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit was being articulated as early as 200 years before that with Church Fathers such as Tertullian and Ignatius, Irenaeus and Augustine. And from the apologetics of Justin Martyr and our earliest baptismal creed—the Apostles'.

Nor did they just slip into common usage, accepted without debate. No, they emerged with great conflict. Angry marches, debates, and, eventually the exile of those declared heretics. There was, after all, a great deal at stake. How did a new religion that had grown out of a monotheistic faith like Judaism that proclaimed One God—"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one God"—defend itself against charges of being polytheistic with its worship of Christ? And how, in fact, could the nature of Christ—the human Jesus and this One who had been resurrected and ascended to God—be explained? It was questions like these that the Councils set out to answer.

Oh, there were many, many ways of expressing the mysteries before the "official" answers were formulated. They were mostly metaphors and poetic images in that early time when people had experiences of God—encounters with a holy mystery that cried out for words—a holy mystery of the God of Israel, YHWH, who now had met them in the person and ministry of Jesus, and who they continued to experience through the power of the Holy Spirit in their midst. It was in these experiences that the stories and words of praise spontaneously began to arise that contained the three-fold symbols. And it was these that Bishops at the Councils tried to capture, knowing like Athanasius, that the words would be inadequate.

Tertullian, perhaps the first to use the word "trinity," used a beautiful image of a plant: God the Father as deep root; the Son as a shoot that breaks forth into the world; the Spirit as the flower or fruit that spreads beauty and fragrance. Augustine talked of fire, brightness, and warmth.

And even after the doctrine was formulated, the images did not cease. For even the doctrines and the creeds are imperfect, incapable of capturing the mystery. Four hundred years later,

John of Damascus used a relational image, “perichoresis” to describe the inner life of God as a unity where the three persons “intermingle in a ceaseless flowing of love and shared life that opens out toward creation”—a circle dance that expands to include all in the rhythm of love and life. There were even pretzels. Yes, pretzels were invented in 610 CE at a monastery in the shape of the prevailing prayer posture—arms crossed across the chest. They were used to help children in their religious learning to remember the Trinity. The three empty holes represented the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

I guess the real question for us today is this? What does God as Holy Trinity mean to us? What difference does this make to us as people? As the Church? Do we simply accept this because it is doctrine? Do we accept it is incomprehensible mystery and say the rote words in our creeds, our prayers, our greetings and blessings?

For Paul, in his second letter to the Corinthians, a community that was locked into conflict, there were desirable attributes that they needed to nurture and practice so that they could live together in harmony: the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit. Grace, love, and communion. Three things that do not produce a church that marches in lock step, but a community that loves and forgives and is together in the midst of—in spite of—their differences. Three things that actually provide quite good criteria for evaluating the success of a Christian community.

For Matthew, who ends his gospel with Jesus sending out the people to baptize, to make disciples, it is going out *in the name of* the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Both the phrases from Paul and from Matthew are important. We know this because they have been lifted from scripture and are found in the liturgy. Paul’s is known as the Apostolic Greeting and is used in many worship settings at the very beginning of the liturgy just as we use “Blessed be God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” Matthew’s is part of the Great Commission, and is the formula used to baptize. It is one way that churches with different theologies and practices can have a measure of unity—the basis of recognizing and accepting a baptism that takes place in another communion.

What does it mean to be baptized--to be commissioned for ministry—in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit? Well, it does not mean we are miraculously endowed with perfection and answers to all questions of faith. It does not erase doubts and questions. Even those disciples who had been with Jesus, who had gone through and experienced the amazing events of his death and resurrection still came to that mountain in Galilee with doubts. And yet, they were being sent out to continue Jesus’ work! Doubts and all.

It does mean that we are accompanied—by Christ through the Holy Spirit—to the ends of the age. It does mean that we are loved and equipped for whatever challenges confront us. It does mean that we are part of a community of faith—as imperfect as it may be—that gathers around the table each week, in relationship with each other to be renewed, healed, and strengthened to go forth to do the work we have been given.

In a short while, after we have recited our creed, after we have greeted one another with the peace of Christ, we will gather at the table to share in the Eucharistic feast. At that table, we will encounter the mystery of our faith. We will experience the presence of God who is the source of our being; the God incarnate who shared our earthly life teaching and healing, living and dying and overcoming death; and God the Spirit who sustains and comforts us and leads us to live in justice, mercy, and peace. The table, the feast is a sacred circle, my friends, a sacred dance to which we are all invited. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—the Living God, the Risen Christ, and the Life-giving Spirit.

Amen.