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Trinity Sunday, Year A

Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields

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“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” In the name of One God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Yesterday morning, I had the honor of witnessing some Jewish teenagers at Germantown Jewish Center share their reflections at a special Shabbat service as part of their “Confirmation,” for them a year of interfaith study, which included a visit to St. Martin’s to learn about Christian faith in the Episcopal tradition. All of the four Confirmands’ reflections were searching and insightful in different ways. One of the Confirmands used three functions or aspects of religion, Belonging, Behaving, and Believing, to analyze the practice and emphases of major religions that they had learned from. As opposed to the emphasis on “belonging” in Judaism, they identified Christianity as a proselyzing religion, one which sought new converts, focused on “believing” first and secondarily as about “behaving,” and finally about “belonging.”

What the confirmand shared is consistent with our reading from Matthew: Jesus’ “Great Commission” to the disciples and the Church: to go and “make disciples of all nations,” “teaching them to obey everything” that Jesus has taught. With baptism as our rite of initiation, from its beginning what is now known as Christianity was an invitation to all people to join in something new – a divinely revealed mission. To become a community not built on cultural heritage or shared language or any other earthly foundation for community, but on divine encounter. For how else can we believe in what Paul himself called, “foolishness” to earthly wisdom, and a “stumbling block” to human reason without divine intervention: a God who is human, was crucified and resurrected. And not only that, but a God who is one and yet three, distinct persons.

What does it mean that Christians believe in a Triune God? What is the Trinity? Who is, or rather who are, God? And why is this understanding foundational to Christian life?

Right before our lesson today from Matthew’s Gospel, the women, braving a great earthquake, come upon the empty tomb and encounter the angel sitting atop the rolled away stone who declares Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. On their way to share the news, the women run into Jesus himself – and seeing him, they fall to his feet in worship. Comforting their fear, Jesus sends them out to share the good news with the rest of the disciples and to tell them to go to Galilee where they will see him.

And so our story picks up today with the eleven disciples, all the original twelve except for Judas, climbing to the top of an unspecified mountain in Galilee, a days-long journey from Jerusalem where they had been, to encounter the resurrected Jesus. And upon seeing him we are told “they worshiped him; but some doubted.” The word here for worship literally means fall to the ground, or “prostrate,” in worship – the disciples on seeing the resurrected Christ, fall down before him in worship, something they never did before his death on the cross. It seems to be the only response that any human being beholding Jesus in his resurrection glory can make. Except we are told in the same phrase, “but some doubted.”

Now the word “doubt” here literally means “double stance,” a wavering or uncertainty of judgment. Perhaps these ones that doubted did not fall to the ground in worship as the rest did. Perhaps they remained apart from the rest, physically as well as mentally wavering, trying to grasp what was happening – that their leader who was crucified was now alive. But I think it’s possible to read this text, and some do, that the full group fell prostrate and yet even in that posture, there was wavering, uncertainty.

But this uncertainty, this doubt, does not keep Jesus from drawing near to them. Declaring the authority given to him in “heaven and on earth,” he shares with them a new mission: a mission to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” This is what is sometimes known as the “Trinitarian Formula” for baptism and other rites of the Church.

As early as the end of the first century C.E., Christians began forming versions of what we now refer to as the Apostles Creed, a statement of belief drawn from the events of the Gospels, specifically to teach those who were preparing for baptism. Because it centers on the realm of “belief,” the Creed precludes any references to Jesus’ earthly ministry, instead focusing on those events, which are the foundation of our understanding of who God has revealed Godself to be: not one unit, but a multiple person unity – free, distinct, equal partners drawn together in a dance of abundant, infinite, eternal self-giving Love.

The Nicene Creed, developed later in 325 C.E. by an ecumenical council, was focused on unifying the beliefs of practicing Christians in response to the rise of what are now considered heresies, or false teachings, specifically regarding the relationships between the members of the Trinity and the nature of Jesus’ divinity. Phrases like “begotten, not made,” references to procession, and to “Being,” rather than attempts to spell out, understand, or explain the trinity, work to preserve the paradox, the sense of mystery, the uncertainty of belief that requires faith.

Do these statements of belief require our unquestioning acceptance in order to hold meaning to us?

What exactly are we affirming when we say these words each Sunday?

As popularized in the movie *Conclave*, which a thriller about a fictional election of a pope, Cardinal Lawrence preaches what those first doubting disciples experienced and what Christians today experience as we recite the creeds, the ancient symbols of our faith: "Certainty is the great enemy of unity...Our faith is a living thing precisely *because* it walks hand in hand with doubt. If there was only certainty, and if there was no doubt, there would be no mystery, and therefore no need for faith."

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus uses the three names of the persons of God that are part of the divine revelation, God's revealing of Godself to human beings in history. When we recite the words of our creeds, we are not reciting some mathematical formula or magical incantation, we are not rejecting our rational minds, those minds, which God created. We are affirming a living faith that human language is not able to pin down, we are recognizing the limits of our human reason and experience and stepping into the unknown in loving trust.

The disciples, still freshly traumatized from their experiences in Holy Week, encounter the transcendent in a new form that defies all logic: a transcendent God, the God who created and is creating the Universe, also a human being who rose from the dead. A God who translated Godself through revelation then required and continues to require translation – a constant tricky enterprise in which part of the meaning is changed each time. But through person that is the Spirit, a person arising from and extending the self-giving love of the Father and the Son, or to use less gendered language, the Source and the Living Word of God, we are now also drawn into this Love – a love that cannot be understood by reason, but can only be known through experience, through a faith that is lived into. This same Spirit who descended to the early disciples at Pentecost translates the Gospel into every culture and to every person. Meaning is not only lost, but continually found, continually revealed through the act of translation.

Our faith then is one that upholds the God revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures; declares the consistency of God's work through human history, made most visible in the person of Jesus Christ, his life, death, resurrection, and ascension; and trusts the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit to fulfill the mission of God: to draw into the freedom and wholeness of a love that cannot be exhausted. St. Martin's, we are invited to join an encounter with self-giving Love that, rather than requiring conformity and assimilation, liberates. Rejecting our imperialist legacy, the domination, the cruelty, and, above all the certainty of the Western institution of the Church, we too can meet the risen Jesus, our Creator, our Advocate in worship and in doubt. In faith, we too can join God's mission of Love and Healing, known first in the worship of a God whose unity is found in diversity. Amen.