

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity

Thomas Gumbleton | May. 22, 2008 The Peace Pulpit

We celebrate, as you know, today, the feast of the Holy Trinity, probably the most profound mystery of our faith. It may surprise you, but this doctrine of the Holy Trinity, as we have come to learn it, probably most of us when we studied our catechism, how God is one God in three persons - there's one nature, three persons in God - but that reformulation of this doctrine did not happen until the fourth century at the Council of Nicaea in the year 325. It's the first time the Church officially taught that our God is a God who lives in a community of love, one God in three persons.

But this wording of the teaching did not come out of nowhere.

The Christians, the community of disciples of Jesus for those 300 years, had experienced the love of God, had come to know God as personal, as someone interacting with them, entering deeply into their lives, and always coming into their lives in love.

That's certainly what is expressed in our first lesson today. As I mentioned in introducing that lesson, this incident that we hear as our lesson today happened after God had already been revealed to Moses as a God of love and a God who wanted to enter into a covenant with the chosen people: "I will be your God, you will be my people." There would be a bond, a deep love, relationship, between God and the people, and God had given them the commandments as a way of living out that covenant. Then, as we remember I'm sure, from our study in Bible history of the chosen people, when Moses was in communion with God, they were worshipping an idol. They were being unfaithful, forsaking the God who had freed them from slavery and led them through the desert.

But then after Moses had come down and destroyed those tablets in anger, God called Moses back to be in communion with him in prayer once more. And then that's when we hear those extraordinary words. "God passed in front of Moses and cried out God's name, 'Yahweh, Yahweh! Yahweh is a God full of pity and mercy, slow to anger, abounding in truth and loving kindness. God shows loving kindness to the thousandth generation and always forgives wickedness, rebellion and sin.' Moses hastened to bow down to the ground in worship."

Moses was overwhelmed by this loving God who, in spite of the unfaithfulness of the people, their arrogant rejection of God, worshipping a molten calf, God is still the God of mercy, forgiveness and love.

I discovered, in one of the commentaries I read about this incident, that the word "mercy" that is used here, is a word that really has as its root "womb." So this mercy of God is like a motherly love of God, the love of a mother that can never be broken. It's amazing how God loved those people but this is the same God who loves us, so without limit, in a very maternal, motherly way, God is constantly quick to forgive, to reach out in loving

kindness.

And then in the gospel lesson, those early Christians too, discovered a God who was being revealed to them again, as a God of unconditional, unlimited love.

"God so loved the world," that means all of us-that God gives God's only son to be one of us, to live among us, to be the living presence and the visible appearance of a God who is love.

Those first Christians knew very well because they had experienced the presence of Jesus in a very concrete and real way, and his humanness. They saw in his life how constantly, Jesus was always reaching out in love-forgiving people, healing people, proclaiming good news to the poor, raising up people-but as John points out, the love of Jesus was beyond limit.

Jesus gave himself for us.

When we hear that, I think many times we think it was like a price that God demanded Jesus pay to redeem us, to buy us back. That's what the word redemption means, "to buy back." But the price, if this really was that God demanded that Jesus suffer, be cruelly treated, be executed, what kind of a God is that?

There's something much deeper in this "God so loved the world that God gave Jesus. Jesus so loved us that Jesus gives his life for us."

What is the deeper reality here is what Jesus said about himself, "When I am lifted up," and he meant when he was on the cross, "I will draw all people to myself through love." Jesus wasn't paying a price to a cruel, tyrant God who demanded this terrible price; Jesus was showing us what God's love really means.

It's a transforming power when you respond to hatred, to violence, with love. It transforms everything. That's what Jesus was showing us, that by being lifted up, accepting the sufferings, the persecution, the execution, he was drawing through love, all people to himself.

Some time ago, I read a small booklet called "Everyday Miracles," and one of those miracles, I think, shows us what's happening when Jesus gave himself for us, for our salvation.

This is an incident that happened during the civil rights period in our country, back in the 1960s. The writer says, "What attracted me to non-violence was watching the evening news in the early '60s and seeing the blacks and whites sit at segregated lunch counters, refusing to move until they were served, while angry whites poured ketchup on their heads, smeared mustard through their hair, pelted them with slurs. I wondered how people could absorb such hatred and violence without striking back? Then I read an account in *The Catholic Worker* newspaper, where a black man was quoted as saying, 'I will let them kick me and kick me until they have kicked all the hatred out of themselves and into my body, where I will transform it into love.' "

That's how Jesus loves us.

He accepts all the violence and hatred of sin, absorbs it into himself, and then pours forth love, even on us who are the sinners.

By that love, Jesus transforms us. He is gradually transforming our world so that our world will become the reign of God's justice, peace and love. So God is revealed to us in the Old Testament and the New Testament through Jesus, as a God who is love, a God who is a community of persons -- Father, speaking the Word, Jesus, and the Father and the Word being joined by the spirit in love. Each a separate person, but each the one God.

As we try to absorb this teaching about our God, that God is a community of persons living infinite, unconditioned love within that community, but then pouring forth that love upon us, obviously it's so that we can be transformed, become loving persons ourselves. That's what St. Paul is exhorting those early Christians at Corinth to do, and what we have to do and respond to this mystery of the trinity. Reach out in love to God in thanksgiving and praise and joy, but also to one another so that we become a community of love, and we build that love in our world.

Paul says to those first Christians and now is saying to us, "Brothers and sisters, be joyful in God's love, strive to be perfect, have courage, be of one mind and live in peace and the God of love, the God of peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss, exchange that love, and all the saints now greet you."

Then Paul says to them and says to us, the final words of this letter to the Corinthians, that can be the final words of our reflection today: "May the grace of Jesus the Lord, the love of God, and the fellowship of the holy spirit be with you now and forever."

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