

Understanding the trinity through the lens of love

Thomas Gumbleton | Jun. 23, 2011 The Peace Pulpit

What we celebrate today is rather rare, perhaps even unique in the liturgical year when we go through the ordinary time and the time of special occasions and feasts.

Because what we celebrate today is not an event like the birth of Jesus or the Resurrection, these things that we believe, nor is it about just a person like we celebrate so often the feast of a saint. Today we celebrate a doctrine, a doctrine of truth of our faith, and that may seem kind of strange because doctrines are abstract and intellectual. They appeal to our mind and not to our emotions, not to our whole person.

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity

Exodus 34:4b-6, 8-9

In fact, this doctrine, we may be surprised to hear, was not formulated within the church until the fourth century at the Council of Nicaea, a gathering of the bishops of the church at that time in 325.

The bishops finally developed this doctrine of the Holy Trinity, the doctrine that we learned from our catechism when we learned about God -- that God is one God but three persons, Father, Son and Spirit.

John 3:16-18

It took a long time for the church to find a way to articulate this truth about God and even though it's formulated in very carefully and very precise terms, we still find it so easy to be confused about the Trinity because most of us probably, when we hear the word "persons," we think of people.

So we think of God almost like three separate people, and that isn't the way it is. God isn't three individual persons as we understand person to be people. Then also, we can be confused because we might say, well, to understand it, maybe what it means is that the way God interacts with anyone of us.

God can interact with me as a father, mother, a parent. So that's what we mean by the Trinity: God interacting with us or through Jesus as our brother, or through the Spirit who gives us life and informs us about God's Word.

So we think of God again as three different ways that God relates to us, but that isn't the mystery of the Trinity. It means that there is one God, and one God only. But somehow within that one God, there is a community of persons.

Perhaps one of the things that enables us to even begin to grasp what we are talking about is the way that one of the disciples describes it in one of the first letter of John: "We have known the love of God and have believed in it. God is love. Those who live in love live in God and God in them."

John and the other first disciples had this insight about God. God is love. Love can't be individual or it isn't really love. Love is something that goes out and becomes an interaction. So if God is love, then somehow within

God, there is a beauty of life.

We can't articulate it well, but we know if we experienced love, there is God. God is love. So we begin to have the beginning of an understanding of what we celebrate today, and the kind of God we celebrate, who is love, is proclaimed very beautifully in our first lesson.

Here is a time when the chosen people have broken their covenant with God. God has been revealed to them through Moses: I am who am. I am.

That's God, but then after Moses receives this name of God and begins to have some interaction with God, God creates a covenant with Moses for the people. They break it. They are unfaithful and even before Moses presents to them the tablets -- we all remember this story from the Old Testament, it's so vivid -- Moses sees the people sinning and he becomes angry, and throws the tablets to the ground and breaks them.

He has a sense, I suppose, that that is the way God reacts. God would want to destroy those people who are so easily unfaithful. Then when Moses goes back up to the mountain to be in God's presence, God passed in front of him and cried out to Moses, "Yahweh, Yahweh."

That means, "I am," or the name of God, "Is a God full of pity and mercy, slow to anger, abounding in truth and loving kindness."

That's how God is revealed to Moses and to the chosen people, and to us -- in spite of our sins, in spite of our failures, no matter what. We might think we have done something terribly wrong and perhaps we have, but we always know that God is a God full of pity and mercy, slow to anger, abounding in truth and loving kindness. This is the God who revealed to us through that experience of Moses, the God of love.

In the Gospel, a passage that we remember because we see it so often on billboards sometimes, John 3:16, is a verse in this Gospel of John. It's that verse that said, "God so loved the world that God sent Jesus, God's own Word, God's own Son, to be our brother."

God so loved us that God came into our midst in Jesus. Why? So that we might share, as John says, eternal life. And by that, John doesn't mean life after death only.

Yes, it will be that, but we share eternal life right now, the life of God through Jesus. God lives within us. That's how much God loves us. So we begin even now to experience God's life which can be a life of peace, joy, love, goodness, a life that we will go into in its fullness as we pass from this life into everlasting life in heaven. But it begins now because God so loved what God had made, all of creation, all of us, that God sends Jesus to bring us God's life.

This is the kind of God that the first disciples had experienced, and over many years as they kept reflecting and so on, they begin to articulate this in the doctrine that we now know as the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, God as a community of persons, God being a God of love, interacting within God's own being and sharing that life with us.

Even though this doctrine is very difficult and in fact, if we think we understand it, then we've totally misunderstood, it is a profound mystery beyond our human ability to understand and articulate well.

Somehow we just know God is a community of persons, and God has revealed that most of all through Jesus, but throughout all of the Old Testament and God continues to reveal through the way God lives in the world now.

Even though we can't grasp the fullness of the mystery or even begin to grasp it, it does have implications for us, especially when we begin to use analogies to describe God and the persons of God. We think of God as Father, because that was the word that the bishops at Nicaea used for the first person of the Trinity. So on this Father's Day, if we think of God as the Father, every father, I hope, would be challenged by this doctrine.

Think of how God is revealed as the Father. Perhaps most clearly in one of the parables that Jesus tells, recorded in Matthew's Gospel, the parable of the Prodigal Son.

There you have a father who has been offended by his son in a dramatic way. His son takes his inheritance, goes and wastes it, lives an evil, sinful life, finally comes to his senses and wants to come back, not to be a son in his father's household, but to be a slave.

You remember the story, I'm sure you do, where the father has been waiting for that son. He's been watching for him and before the son can ever come into the father's presence, the father goes out, meets him, embraces him, and takes him back.

That's the kind of God that is revealed to us as the Father, the God that is unlimited in love and forgiveness, and so, a father. If we want to imitate God, we have to be that kind of Father, unconditional, unlimited love for our children. That's a very real challenge, but that's the challenge that comes to us from this doctrine of the Trinity.

I might also mention that it isn't only as a father that we think of God. We don't do this as often in our liturgies and in our prayers, but there is a very extraordinary passage in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah about God as mother.

This is the challenge to all mothers and to all of us who try to be paternal or maternal in any way. Sing, oh heavens and rejoice, oh earth. Break into song, oh mountains, for God has comforted God's people, taken pity on those who are afflicted.

Zion, that is the people, said, "God has forsaken me. My God has forgotten me," but listen, can a woman forget a baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child of her womb?

Of course, you say, "No, that could never happen," but then Isaiah says, "Yet though a woman might forget, I, God, as Mother, will never forget you."

That's God as Mother. Again, unlimited, unconditional love. So if we're going to respond to this mystery of the Trinity today, we must try to enter into this communion of love who is God.

And if we do by trying to act as God would act, always acting out of love, unconditional, unlimited love, then we will begin to experience what John says in the Gospel: Jesus came to give us life, life without limit, without end. God so loved the world that God sent Jesus to bring us everlasting life, and to begin to share that life right now.

So as we reflect on this Word of God today, perhaps we should carry with us and maybe go back to it later in the day, these words of St. Paul to the community at Corinth, spoken to us, too.

"Finally, brothers and sisters, be joyful. 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, and so, the grace of Jesus, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with all of you."

[This homily was given at St. Hilary Parish, Redford, Mich.]

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