



1st United Methodist Church

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Encountering God

A sermon preached by Dr. Harold Henderson at First United Methodist Church,
Gainesville, on Trinity Sunday, May 30, 2010.

Today is the First Sunday After Pentecost, designated in the church calendar as Trinity Sunday, the Sunday when we focus our attention on the Doctrine of the Trinity. It is a very important day in the church calendar because the Doctrine of the Trinity teaches us a lot about the God we worship.

1. Interestingly, it can hardly be claimed that this important doctrine is a New Testament doctrine. The seeds of Trinitarian Faith are in the New Testament but nowhere is the doctrine fully developed.

The seeds can be found, for example, in some of the things Jesus shared with his disciples, particularly in what is described as his farewell discourse (see John 14-17). Jesus had tried to tell the disciples that he would be leaving them in the near future, an idea that filled them with uncertainty and dread. Jesus, on the other hand, assured them that his departure would, in fact, be good for them because, when he returned to his Father, the Father would send them another Comforter who could be with them always and everywhere in ways that the physical Jesus could not.

There are two isolated instances in the New Testament, in which a Trinitarian formula is used. One near the end of the Gospel of Matthew records Jesus as commissioning his disciples to “go and make disciples of all the nations baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt. 28:19), though there is serious dispute among scholars as to whether this is a later addition to the original text. The other instance is Paul’s benediction to the Corinthians: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.” (11 Corinthians 13:13), the only one of Paul’s more than a dozen benedictions that is Trinitarian. All the other benedictions are either Unitarian or Binitarian.

2. It is important to realize that, when we have said the best we can say about God, we have not said it all. The infinitude of God cannot be captured in the finest of human thought or language. We need to remember this when we argue with each other within Christianity and with other faith traditions about whose understanding of God is right and whose is wrong.

3. It is also important to understand that the Doctrine of the Trinity was not developed as an exercise in philosophical theology. It did not arise out of a process of retreat by scholars who secluded themselves in the desert to think and pray this concept into being. Far from it.

4. Then, we might well ask, where did the Doctrine of the Trinity come from? It was developed by the early church, over a long period of time, as the Apostles and their successors attempted to come to grips with the powerful ways in which they had encountered God, and to express their experience in some sort of coherent way that could be passed on for the benefit of succeeding generations. The development (from at least the Second Century CE onward) of the Apostles Creed, with its Trinitarian Structure, is in parallel with this process at least to some extent.

The earliest Christians had encountered God in the Hebrew traditions into which they were born and in which they had grown up. They encountered God in the Torah, the road rules for life given to their forebears by God through Moses. They encountered God in the exodus from bondage in Egypt, kept alive in their experience by the annual celebration of Passover. They encountered God in the painful experience of exile in Babylon, and the joyful celebration of their forebears' return to their homeland. They encountered God in the music and poetry of the Psalms, and in the powerful challenges of the prophetic tradition.

They had encountered the one true God, who made the heavens and the earth and all that is in them, as distinct from the plethora of gods worshipped by their neighbors and conquerors. They were never going to be moved from their monotheistic faith. Their belief in the one true God was not up for grabs!

5. Then, they encountered Jesus, the man from Galilee, who was one of them but different. He had an innate authority that didn't derive from any human institution or structure and was superior to them. He healed people, brought peace to troubled minds, brought disparate even antagonistic people together, he treated women with equality and dignity, and embraced Gentile Samaritans who were beyond the pale of the chosen people, and he taught them to pray and to experience the presence of God in the midst of their humanness. They were with him as he approached a violent, painful, shameful death and did so reluctantly but with quiet determination to be true to his divine calling, come what may.

Then, they met him alive again and, though bewildered and fearful at first, they gained new courage eventually to face even the prospect of their own martyrdom with quiet courage. Modern day skeptics can balk at the idea of resurrection but not the early disciples. They encountered God in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth risen from the dead!

6. Later still, true to what Jesus had told them, the Holy Spirit came among them and upon them in demonstrable ways that energized them to be and to do what had never

come within the range of their human aspirations. They encountered God in the Holy Spirit anywhere and any time.

7. The Doctrine of the Trinity was the earliest Christians' attempt to embrace all of this inspiring reality in a coherent way that remained true to their monotheistic tradition and to their encounters with God in three different but interrelated manifestations of the Divine reality and presence. There is mystery here, but what is religion without mystery? The early Christians were not afraid of mystery, nor was their concept of God so small that he could not manifest himself to them in three different "persons".

8. What is the point of this Trinitarian understanding of God for us? It means that the great God who made the universe is the same God who entered fully into our human experience, even our death, in Jesus, is the same God who is present with us always and everywhere by the Holy Spirit. It means that God is not unreachable, unknowable, untouchable because he has made himself accessible, knowable and touchable in an historical person named Jesus of Nazareth, and by the ever-present Holy Spirit.

It is encouraging to realize that this God does not spend his time waiting for us to step out of line so that he can punish us. He spends his time reaching out to us, especially in our human weakness and frailty, so that he can transform us into the kind of people he created us to be. Let us journey towards him so that we can grow ever more into his likeness – "moving on to perfection" John Wesley called it and, for him, perfection was "perfection in love."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.
