

LELC Trinity Sunday 2019

There are about three things a preacher “has” do on Trinity Sunday: you “have” to sing “Holy, Holy, Holy.” Check. You “have” to do something with or about the Athanasian Creed (because when on earth else would you do anything with it). Check. And you do your best to come up with an answer to the question, “What is it and why does anyone care?” That’s the part that is the hardest for me to want to do. People fought and died over some of these doctrinal principles. But I keep finding myself thinking, “We are on the brink of global self-destruction if we don’t figure out how to live and work together. What possible difference can anything about some abstract concept like Trinity make?”

Oh, and just for grins, add to that that it’s Father’s Day. Now, it may not seem as hyped as Mother’s Day. But I have found over the years that Father’s Day is just as fraught with deep pain or old sorrows as Mother’s Day is. It is just that people are less likely to talk about it. There are sad tales of absent fathers, abusive fathers, distant fathers, problematic father-child relationships, fathers who want most in the world be with their kids and can’t be, and on and on. So what does one do with any or all that on a day we celebrate that Jesus’ use of “Father” to speak of the way his (and our) relationship to God was enshrined in an incomprehensible idea about God we call the doctrine of the Trinity.

Maybe let’s start there. What was up with Jesus calling God “Father” in the first place? That was actually a pretty radical thing he was doing. Up to that point, in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, God was more often called King, or Lord. The writers spoke of “the God of our fathers” but it was still in the sense of the Sovereign of the Universe, transcendent and all-powerful. The places where God and father went together were few and far between. Once in the Psalms, God is called “the father of orphans and the protector of widows”; and Isaiah says God will be called “Wonderful Counselor, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” That’s about it.

But then Jesus comes along and calls God “Father” all the time. Jesus even teaches the disciples to pray, “Our father...” “Pater e’mon” or at least so the Gospels tell us. We really need to remember that the Gospels were written in Greek, a language Jesus never spoke. Jesus spoke Aramaic, the Semitic language of the Jews of that time period. Greek was the language of the educated elite and of the Empire. Aramaic was the local language of the common folk. Paul, who was bi-lingual, says in Romans 8 that Jesus called out, “Abba, Father.” “Abba” was the word for

father used by close family members, it's more like Papa, Dad, or even Daddy. Jesus was trying to help his followers see that God was not some formal, distant, judge or ruler. Jesus was trying to teach them that God was a tender, caring, present provider and protector. *formal*

A couple years ago I was at a conference led by John Dominic Crossan. He talked about how the context for Jesus using that word for God was a Judea that was occupied by Rome at a time when the Romans had embarked on some very large building projects. They built Caesarea Maritima by the sea and later they built a new capital city, I think it was Decapolis. If a man didn't have land, or a boat, maybe he could go get a construction job far from home and provide for his family that way. (When does that ever happen, right?) So perhaps when Jesus urged his followers to call God "Abba" he was tapping into a societal longing for the presence of a loving papa, one that would protect and provide for the little ones – especially for those who were most vulnerable to the abuses of the Empire.

But another scholar, Neil Douglas-Klotz, suggests that "Abba" is just the Greek adaptation of the Aramaic word Jesus would actually have used. The word Klotz suggests Jesus used was something closer to "Abwoon" which is more like "parent" meaning either mother or father. It still had the sense of providing, protecting, giving life. Whatever the case, whenever Jesus called God "Abba, Father" he was inviting his followers to re-imagine their relationship with God. God was not the harsh and temperamental sovereign on high they must strive to appease. No, God was as close as a papa or mama would be, to compassionately provide for their needs, protect them from harm, and ensure the well-being of all the children.

So what happened? How did we get from Jesus calling God "Abba" or "Abwoon" and a Christianity, which started out to be an inclusive, egalitarian community of radical welcome and care to God being "Pater Pantocrator" translated as Father Almighty, with people thinking that God is just as distant and judging as ever and a Christianity that is, for the most part, just another expression of male power-over and the patriarchy? I call it another one of those handiworks of the Devil, this time with a linguistic slight of hand.

Let's remember, Jesus also often spoke of the Spirit, that same compassionate, providing, protecting, present God who would come to them, dwell within them, and empower them to live out all that he had taught them. The Spirit, in Hebrew (and presumably Aramaic) was feminine, a she. We could reasonably translate

Jesus saying, I will send you the Spirit, she will come to you...: We see the same idea in the text today from Proverbs, Wisdom, is a she. (Sophia in Greek)

But all kinds of other variations about God also got lost in translation. In the Hebrew Scriptures, there are two commonly used names for God. One is "Yahweh" which is actually a verb meaning something like, "Will be what will be." And the other is "Elohim" which is a plural noun (like pants or scissors) and should properly always be used with the they/them/their pronouns.

When the philosophers and doctrinal types got ahold of all of this they wanted things to be consistent. They wanted nothing to get in the way of the Oneness of God. So everything became "He" God, he this and God, he that. And if you don't think calling God He all the time doesn't matter, you don't understand the power of language. Years ago, a colleague of mine told the story about how one little boy in her congregation said that he thought God liked boys better than girls because he was one. The doctrine was consistent, but something was lost. At a first level, Christianity lost its egalitarian nature. It became just another venue for patriarchy.

But it was even more than that. Even though they knew the shape of the language, those thinkers relinquished the expansiveness of God, the indeterminate-ness of God. That meant they also gave up the inclusiveness of God, the boundary-crossing, barrier-busting mystery of God. I think it's time we tried to get it back. What would happen to us and our thoughts about including the gifts of everyone if every time we spoke of the Spirit we said, "the Spirit, she"? If Elohim is plural and goes with the pronouns they/them/their does that mean in the world of LGBTQ! God is Q? Or !? Too big to fit in our mental box? And what might that mean for folks who feel they don't fit into predetermined boxes either? And if God is a verb, does that mean we most truly experience God in our living and not so much in our thinking?

There was a quote online yesterday that read, "Let us feed the hungry, house the homeless, stop the killing, and provide medicine to the sick. When we have accomplished all that then we can sit around and argue about religion." I kind of agree with that, though it's possible it's a little more complicated. I inclined to wonder how we Christians of the 21st century can regain a sense of the mystery and real inclusiveness of the They-He-She Trinity?

How can we speak of the intimate protective provision of the Abwoon, the self-giving love of Jesus, and the urgency and power of the Spirit in a way that reclaims

the expansiveness and inclusivity of God that Jesus was trying to reveal in the first place? Can we Christians stop using God to serve our purposes to gain power and control and start trying instead to be part of God's purposes to love and redeem and heal the world? I don't know the answers to these questions. I just think that they are really good questions.

I do know this. God is always a mystery that is way bigger than us. God is more loving and forgiving than we can even imagine being. And more powerful than we know. Maybe we need to stop trying to understand God. Maybe it will be enough to start delighting in God, feasting with God, finding our healing and wholeness in God. Abba, Jesus, Spirit; each one is all about love – the whenever, wherever, and however we can experience love. Let's delight together in that. Let us give thanks and praise for mystery of the Trinity, the mystery of God's love for us, for all. Amen.