

On Becoming One

sermon digest

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Exodus 3:1-15; John 17:1, 6-8, 11, 20-23

carolyn dipboye

And so here we are on this first Sunday after Pentecost back where we were last year, confronted with the challenge of seeking again to interpret the meaning of the Trinity to our Christian life and relationships. Trinity Sunday is the only Sunday of the Christian year specifically set aside to give consideration to a doctrine rather than an event. It is, admittedly, a Sunday that strikes fear into the heart of the preacher because, as one colleague has pointed out, there is the assumption that we are assigned the feat of preaching a sermon that is simultaneously inspirational and explanatory. As anyone who has ever tried knows, it is not possible to adequately explain the Trinity, much less make the explanation inspirational. "You might as well," my colleague suggests, "ask someone to explain the evolution of fencing wire and make it sexy" [Nathan Nettleton, LaughingBird.net, June6, 2004].

If our purpose this morning is to explain the Trinity, our task is overwhelming. The briefest acquaintance with the pushes and shoves, anathemas and excommunications of 2000 years of church history makes that quite clear. If, however, our purpose is to wrestle once again with the immensity of the God we would worship and the manifold ways in which God has come to us in human history and in our own personal histories, then perhaps we can begin see our way forward. We acknowledge that the minute we attempt to speak of the mystery of God, we are in over our heads. Yet we humbly confess with Augustine: "We do not speak to exhaust the mystery; we speak to keep from being silent."

In his introductory essay to Judaism in *The Tent of Abraham: Stories of Hope and Peace for Jews, Christians, and Muslims*, Rabbi Arthur Waskow introduces a tool that might prove helpful to us in undertaking this morning's assignment. Waskow is the founder and director of the prophetic Shalom Center and a front line participant in the vibrant Jewish renewal movement. Designated by the United Nations as a "Wisdom Keeper" for the 1996 Habitat II conference of forty intellectual and religious leaders in Istanbul, recipient of the 2001 Jewish Peace Fellowship's Abraham Joshua Heschel Award, and recognized by *Newsweek* in 2007 as one of the fifty most influential American rabbis, Waskow has spent a lifetime seeking to be faithful both to the God of Abraham and the crying need of the present age for a relevant, but faithful voice. As precedent, Waskow points to the example of the first five hundred years of the Common Era when the parables, legal rulings, philosophical debates and thoughts on everyday life were gathered into the Talmud. One of the rabbis' most significant contributions, he holds, was their conviction that the Torah was not merely written in black ink on white parchment but in black fire on white fire. The "blank" or white spaces of the Torah, await every generation to be read anew as each generation seeks to decipher how they can live faithful lives, in worlds utterly different from the world in which the black fire was encoded [pp. 29-30].

More than an orthodoxy to be mindlessly mouthed, the church's accumulation of words about the Trinity seek to bear witness to the God who has come to us in history in various and sundry ways. If you become frustrated with trying to figure out the three-in-one and the one-in-three formulations, that's okay. Go to the white spaces and read between the lines of witness to the God who has come to humankind again and again and who comes still today.

Living a hundred and fifty yards from the beach, respected English minister and writer Leslie D. Weatherhead spoke of his love for the ocean and the role it played in his day-to-day life and musings. Yet, despite his familiarity with its shores, even if he walked down to water's edge to fill a beaker to have the water chemically analyzed, he admitted he would not even begin to know the full reality of the vast Atlantic from which it came. "What," he asked, "can a beaker of salt water tell me about what goes in the vast, silent depths of the ocean, or of the majestic, terrifying storms which sweep across it, or of its incredible power?" [*The Christian Agnostic*, p. 38].

How much more so with the God of the universe? We speak to that we know and experience; we glean the scriptures and the experience of the church through the ages; we sing hymns seeking to give expression to that for which words alone are insufficient. Like one whose rapture for one's beloved seems beyond expression, we try anyway. Rather than simply giving up and keeping silent, we turn our best efforts to clarifying both within ourselves and for our beloved the depths of our love. And, we do it not once, not twice, but for a lifetime.

We should remember, however, we are not alone. As people of faith, we recall the experience of those who have gone before us, not so that we can become imprisoned in the limited discoveries of their lifetime, but so that we can grow from them. Two insights from the experience of the Jews are particularly instructive—both have to do with the names of God.

Standing before the burning bush, Moses asked of God: "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you, and they ask me, 'What is his name?' What shall I say to them?' The answer, "I AM WHO I AM," has instigated white fire throughout the generations. Absent vowels in its early formulation, we can only guess at its pronunciation. As Rabbi Waskow observes, there are several thousand theories as to what the word originally meant. Its four letters (YHWH) may be a conflation of the letters making up the past, present and future of the verb *to be*, thus giving expression to God as *The Eternal/One*. They may be translated in the future tense, "I will be Who I will Be," speaking to the freedom and self-determination of God; or they may be translated in the causative tense, signifying "the One Who brings into Being" or the Ground of all Being. Another alternative is to speak the four letters as if they had no vowels: "Yyyyhhwwhhh" so that they are heard simply as a breathing sound, signifying the "Breath of Life." The mystery of God's name and the reverence with which it was later penned by the scribes and left unspoken speak volumes of the boundless being of the One to whom it points and serve as a model of diligence in guarding against easy and arrogant presumption upon a God who will not be held captive by any human system.

The word for god (*Elohim*) common to the near eastern culture in which the Hebrew faith emerged was plural, referring either to the God or the gods. For much of the time in which the Hebrew scriptures were emerging, multiple gods were not denied; but the exclusive worship of *YHWH* was the divine command. Rather than depicting God in splendid isolation, the Hebrew scriptures frequently depict God in consultation with a heavenly council. The first story of creation depicts God speaking in the plural saying, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our

likeness” [Genesis 1:26]. Whether we have here a divine plural representation of God or reference to a heavenly council, God is depicted as one who in relationship creates human beings in the divine image for relationship.

Christian scriptures unfold to speak of God in Christ and God present in the Spirit—a plurality of *persona* representative of the varying ways we encounter God. We can break down here into tri-theism or into unending slights of hand, seeking to magically turn three back into one. Erring in either direction misses the point. Perhaps the best indication of where we might go comes from John’s rendition of the final prayer of Jesus:

“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” [17:20-21].

In the final analysis, the oneness of God is not a matter for ivory towered speculation. It is about our faithfulness in mirroring God in the relationships into which we enter. Specifically for Christ’s church, it is about loving communion that opens out like the love of God in Christ to include those who are outside of relationship. Specifically, it means pouring ourselves out for one another and for those in need beyond the doors of the church.

If we are going to test ourselves and one another on how well we are able to capture the meaning of the Trinity, perhaps, then, it is just here that we start. Are we putting together a community of faith that mirrors the oneness, the inclusiveness, the compassionate love of the God we seek to worship and serve? If we would measure the orthodoxy of our claims about God, let us begin here.