



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

The Trinity

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

June 28, 2011

I found an interesting bit of information compiled from the Episcopal Church's "red book" which is published every three years for our General Convention. Every Episcopal congregation is listed in it. The most frequently used name is Christ Church, followed by St. John's and then Trinity – we share that name with 520 churches around the country.

St. Paul, St. Andrew, Grace, St. James, St. Luke, St. Mark and All Saints round out the top ten. For most of those names, people can generally understand the one for whom they are named. Christ, well that's clear, and likewise, St. John, St. Paul and the other apostles. Those churches might lift up qualities found in their patron for a part of their mission or sense of self. For those of us in Trinity Churches, that might not be so easy. After all, the Trinity is one of the most esoteric and often misunderstood doctrines of Christianity.

The word Trinity is not found in the Bible, although the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are. First grouped together in Paul's 2nd letter to the church in Corinth which gives us the lovely closing apostolic benediction "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you." Today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew is the Trinitarian baptismal formula and the promise to be with us always. I love that so much that it hangs in my office.

Two early church leaders, Theophilus of Antioch and Tertullian, an African theologian, are both credited in the late second century with the earliest use of the term Triad or Trinity. But it would not be until the famous Councils of Nicaea – in the fourth century that the doctrine of Trinity began to be formed. The first council gave us the Nicene Creed with its Trinitarian structure. The work begun there continued into the 7th century. It's hard work defining a mystery.

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Until recently, the “Father, Son, Holy Spirit” formula was the only way to name those three within the One. As comforting and familiar as this might be, limiting a mystery to one name or set of names does not necessarily do it justice. And so, in recent years, in part driven by a move to less exclusive and limiting language, many new ways of naming the Trinity have arisen. You get to decide, at any time what reveals a bit more of the mystery of the Trinity best for you. The Giver, the Gift and the Giving. God the Father as the Giver, God the Son as that which is given and God the Holy Spirit as the Giving which is so dynamic that one word could never be enough. Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer; the Love, the Beloved and the Loving; the Source, the Wellspring and the Living Water, the One who was and is and is to come. A formula which is helpful to me in how I think about who these three are is the Mind, the Idea and the Imagining. As you can see, all of these are attempts to address the three persons of the Trinity without gender and that in some way, try to escape using language and imagery that is personified. My old boss, the Dean at the American Cathedral was the only one I know who managed to mangle the genders. Of course that was because he couldn’t get the French right and so what he ended up saying, unintentionally, was “In the Name of the Father, and of the daughter and of the Holy Spirit. I actually kind of like it!

There was a time, long ago in a galaxy far, far away, that the doctrine of the Trinity was a hot topic. Public debates, charges of heresy, and the first schism around the year 1000 when the Eastern Church split from Rome over language in the Nicene Creed about the origin of the Holy Spirit. Apparently, those days are gone and it is really too bad because the Trinity, as an idea and as a model has much to contribute to how we understand the underlying purpose in our lives. The most exciting understanding of this three-fold mystery to have been elevated in the last two thousand years is that God – this three-in-one Divinity is a community. We do not believe in three Gods we believe that all that is Divine expresses itself in relationship. The Trinity gives us the image of God as community. And not only community, but a community that maintains the integrity of its distinctions while evoking an indivisible wholeness.

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The image of Trinitarian community is a healthy model for the human community. Think, if you will, of our congregation and the world outside of our doors – two points of a triangle. The third point is what causes us to interact and what happens when we do. It is a combination of our faith and our action. If we have no connection to the greater world, we do not reflect the nature of the community that is God. That connection is dynamic, like the Holy Spirit, it is the charge of electricity arcing between two electrodes. It can heat things up or get them moving. Being on The Way is always about movement.

Another important aspect of triune reality is its stability. The triangle is the most stable shape because everything is equally related to everything else. In a triangle, each point is equally connected to the other two. The Trinity is described as a dance of equals. Relationships that are in balance – with each party equally respected and empowered are divine things.

The Anglican tradition has always relied on a three legged stool – scripture, tradition, and reason. A three legged stool never rocks; it sits solidly with each leg bearing equal weight. When we manage to honor all three in our theology and in our decisions we contribute to spiritual maturity for ourselves and hopefully for the world around us. If we were to focus solely on scripture, we would not be able to appreciate the wondrous work of God in things too tiny for us to see without a microscope or too far to gaze upon without a telescope. Or we might use those tools and not know that we are seeing God's work through them. If we relied solely on the Christian traditions then clergy might all be expected to be celibate men. But in applying reason to the wisdom of scripture and our cherished history and traditions we stay open and allow the dynamic nature of faith to continually make us new. And yet each leg of this stool provides a mooring place for our spiritual journey, to keep us from going somewhere strange. We cannot discount any of them and be true to our faith. We are at our best when we maintain the stability of our three legged stool.

Think of our Trinity – this spiritual home – this place that has wisely identified Christ, Community and Compassion as our vision. It is comprised of three things; the congregation, the clergy and all that happens when we come together. We worship, we do good works, we find joy in our time together, we

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pray, we imagine, we dream. But we are not Trinity without all three in dynamic relationship. Now within the community of the Holy Trinity, everything is in perfect wholeness and so communication is not an issue. It's not as if the Holy Spirit doesn't answer her emails or as if God the Father forgets to RSVP to God the Son's dinner party. The unity of the Holy Trinity is complete and eternal. For earthly Trinitarian communities, the relationships must be tended and nurtured by communication, which is sharing and listening. We have to work at that which is implicit in the God community. And when we do – the energy of this place begins to shimmer. It pulses out into the community and draws others in. It discovers hidden gifts. It heals old wounds. It becomes holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty, blessed Trinity.

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