

The St. John's Pulpit

St. John's Baptist Church 300 Hawthorne Lane Charlotte, NC 28204
704.333.5428 www.stjohnsbaptistchurch.org



WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE JEBUSITES?

Matthew 28:16-20 and 2 Corinthians 13:14

Trinity Sunday, May 22, 2016
The Rev. Dennis W. Foust, PhD, Senior Minister

Life can be confusing. When you live honestly, you encounter questions and you are confronted by conundrums. You have gathered in this Sanctuary today, hoping your life is less confusing when you leave than when you entered. Yet, relating with The Living God can be confusing.

Confusion was active a few years ago when a subscriber wrote to a magazine, *“Dear Editor: When I subscribed a year ago you stated that if I was not fully satisfied at the end of the year I could have my money back. Well, I would like to have my money back and I ask that you apply it on my subscription for another trial year. Let’s see if you can do better.”*

Politicians can confuse you. You may remember one politician saying, *“I have opinions of my own – strong opinions – but I don't always agree with them.”*

Today is Trinity Sunday; and the idea of the Trinity can be confusing. It is my hope to send you forth with increased clarity and less confusion today. I try to remember the warning of my friend, Dr. John Killinger, who suggests, *“Only the preacher still believes that people come to church desperately anxious to discover whatever happened to the Jebusites.”* (By the way, some people suggest the Palestinians are descendants of the Jebusites and need to be killed. I am not one of those people.) One fellow said, *“Listening to an annual sermon on the Trinity is like having your annual physical. You know it is important. You just wish someone else would go through the agony for you.”*

**Let us agree that the idea of the Trinity is difficult to get your mind around.
So, consider the Trinity as a way of relating with The Living God who is all around you.**

The final words in Second Corinthians are, *“May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”* (2 Cor. 13:14) The Gospel of Matthew concludes with Jesus commissioning his followers in a Trinitarian exhortation to, *“...make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...”* In part, Jesus is saying to his followers, *‘you cannot follow me and live for yourselves.’* It is absurd for anyone to pretend they are following Jesus when their life is fixed in place. Jesus is saying, *‘by following me, you are immersing your life in a relationship with The Living God who is all around you – in the love of the Father, in the teachings of the Son, and in the power of the Spirit. So, I send you out like the wind to spread this flaming good news of The Living God.’*

Today, I invite you to look at the idea of the Trinity through three scopes: a telescope, a microscope and a kaleidoscope.

Consider the Idea of the Trinity through the Telescope of History.

A telescope allows you to see more clearly into the distance. In the distant past, the idea of the Trinity developed Jesus' early followers as they clarified their commitments to Jesus as Lord. Jesus spoke of God as 'Abba,' and taught his followers the Spirit would be their guide.

After Jesus was no longer among his followers and after their experience on The Day of Pentecost with the empowering Holy Spirit of God, the early Church started searching for language to describe their experience of God as Father, their commitment to Jesus as Lord of their faith and their life in the power of God's Spirit. Over time, persecution forced the followers of Jesus to distinguish themselves from their Jewish forebears. Like the Jews, followers of the Way of Jesus were monotheists; believing in one God. Yet, they saw Jesus as the revelation of God speaking of Jesus and the Father as one. Yes, they were a bit confused.

When you look at the idea of the Trinity, you realize it was a relational idea before it was a doctrinal creed. The word, "Trinity," does not appear in the Bible at all. In fact, less than a dozen passages of Christian Scripture refer to God as a triune – Father, Son and Spirit.

As you look through the Telescope of History, you notice the word, "Trinity," was not used in language about God until the years 180 to 220. Theophilus first used the word in Greek. Then, Tertullian used the word in Latin. And, over time, several notions of the Trinity emerged. As you can imagine, confusion ensued and several conflicting explanations surfaced:

- *Subordinationism* suggested three ranks of deity; Father above Son who outranked Spirit.
- *Modalism* proposed God wore three different masks as Father, Son and Spirit.
- *Tri-theism* explained God as three individual and separate deities who, when you put them all together, constitute the fullness of God.
- *Arianism* (taught by Arius) saw Jesus as a demi-god; beyond human – but not divine.

It was Arianism, primarily, that provoked the Roman Emperor, Constantine, to call for a gathering of church leaders in Nicaea. The year was 325. Constantine and the bishops of the Church sought unity through uniformity between the Roman Empire and the Roman Church. The emperor decided who would be invited to Nicaea and paid for all expenses. Theologians were gathered, in large measure, to establish an agreement as to the person of Jesus and his relationship to God. The Council of Nicaea banished Arius from the Church and wrote The Nicene Creed as the first Trinitarian statement enforced as the doctrine for all clergy in The Roman Universal (or Catholic) Church. Throughout the centuries, this Nicene Creed has been the basis for all mainstream thinking about God as a Trinitarian Being.

Transition:

For some people, the words of creeds are as familiar as scripture. Kevin Gray knows a fellow who reads a creed each Sunday with his congregation. However, when he comes to points in the creed with which he disagrees, he is silent. This fellow understands what you know to be true. No creed is capable of explaining the indescribable deity or encompassing the ineffable, majestic mystery of The Living God. As you view the idea of the Trinity through the telescope of history, you see people in search of relational clarity directed toward doctrinal uniformity.

Consider the Idea of the Trinity through the Microscope of Jesus.

Jesus knew that people do not relate with God through faith, not doctrinal statements. Jesus wrote one message in the dust and we do not know what it said. He left behind no written doctrines. Jesus spoke of faith as ‘obedient trust.’ In the life of St. John’s, we use the phrase, ‘active faith.’ In the teachings of Jesus, faith is always active. Faith is the obedient trust you activate when you plant a seed in the soil. Faith is the obedient trust you activate when you believe God is working on your behalf – even when you cannot yet see how. Faith is the obedient trust activated when a child hears the voice of a parent saying ‘stop’ before they step into the street. As you put the life, ministry and teachings of Jesus under the microscope, you see Jesus practicing active faith (obedient trust) in The Living God.

Jesus spoke of The Living God in relational language; as Father and Spirit. For Jesus, God is relational. When you are in a relationship with someone, you do not merely love them, you know them. There is a huge difference between loving someone and knowing someone. There is a tremendous difference between you being loved by someone and you being known by them. Some people will love you until they know you. And, in like manner, there are some people you may love until you get to know them. *We call this dating.* The Living God does not date you. The Living God knows you and loves you still. And, The Living God allows you to choose to love and know The Living God. As followers of Jesus, we get to know God better each day.

Jesus tells you that God relates with you in a similar fashion to how a compassionate parent relates with a child;
providing for you and disciplining you,
showing you the best way for you to live,
forgiving you, redeeming you, reconciling with you,
always desiring and hoping the best for you,
consistently being patient with you, allowing you the freedom to learn from your failures, and letting you punish yourself because of your failures and nurturing you despite your failures.
God is like a Father who cares for and protects his children.
God is like a Mother who gives birth, feeds and defends her children.
Jesus teaches you to relate with The Living God by praying, “*Our Father...*”

Jesus also teaches that God is Spirit – invisible, intangible, yet mysteriously present.
God is the spiritual power who is alive within you as comforter and guide.
As you live in active faith, you bear the fruit of the compassionate Spirit of God.
Jesus reveals the nature of this Spirit of God to you and makes God’s love accessible to you.

Transition

You will never comprehend the fullness of God by cognitive gymnastics. Yet, Jesus introduces to you The Living God as a compassionate parent and as Holy Spirit with Whom you can have a personal relationship. The Living God empowers to offer servant ministry in the world. The Living God is always present with you and seeking to mature in you the character of Jesus. Having viewed the idea of the Trinity through the telescope of history and the microscope of Jesus. Let’s take one more look; this time through the kaleidoscope of God as Revealed Light.

Consider the Idea of the Trinity through the Kaleidoscope of God as Revealed Light.

I used to visit a retired oral surgeon who collected kaleidoscopes. He enjoyed handing a kaleidoscope to a person and saying, “*Look through there and tell me how many colors you see.*” He was especially interested whether a person could see blue fading into yellow and would ask them to name that color. Most human eyes cannot distinguish ‘*image fading*,’ when two colors fade into one another to form a new color. The human eye does not see blue fading into yellow; the human eye sees brown. The human eye can distinguish about 10 million colors. A computer can display about 17 million colors. However, the number of colors that can be mathematically generated by multiplying colors, light conditions and viewing conditions is more than 18 decillion – that is 18 followed by 33 zeros (18,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000). And I remember being excited when I got my first box of 64 crayons.

In 1 John 1:5, we read, “*This is the message we have heard from Jesus and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.*” Light is revealed through at least 18 decillion colors. Can you imagine seeing the world through only three colors? The idea of the Trinity points you to a relationship with The Living God who is beyond your capacity to comprehend or describe. The Living God cannot be limited to three relationships of Father, Son and Spirit; but that is a good place for you to begin.

In the 5th Century, **Augustine** was struggling with the idea of the Trinity. One day, as he was walking along the ocean shore, thinking about the idea of the Trinity, he noticed a boy who was playing in the sand. The boy had dug a hole and was going back and forth to the ocean, filling a seashell with water and then emptying it into the hole in the sand. Augustine asked him what he was doing. The boy responded, “I am putting the ocean into this hole.” Augustine wrote, “I realized this was what I had been trying to do. Standing on the shores of time, I was trying to put into my finite mind ideas that are infinite.”

So, friends, guard yourselves against trivializing God or limiting God to any doctrinal formula. Nurture your sense of wonder and awe. Protect yourself against creating God in your own image. In this day of shallow information and self-absorption, you are tempted to make God into a safe and overly familiar ancestral deity who thinks like you, loves like you, hates like you and affirms you as you are today. When you trivialize God, you live as though there is never any danger, surprise or confusing moments which lead you to confession of sin and repentance in relating with God. But, friends, that is not discipleship; that is self-centered idol worship!

Let us agree that the idea of the Trinity is difficult to get your mind around.

So, allow the idea of the Trinity to help you in your relationship with The Living God, as revealed by Jesus; for this God is compassionate, is all around you and is always with you.

This week, you will relate with people who are trying to relate with God. You can offer them your idea of the Trinity through the telescope of history or the microscope of Jesus. Or, you can offer them a glance through your theological kaleidoscope showing God as Eternal Light. Of course, what they really want to know is how you relate with God and whether your relationship with God makes a difference in how you live every day. So, show them. Amen!