

Trinity Sunday, June 11, 2017 St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland WA
Nigel Taber-Hamilton Genesis 1:1-2:4a, 2 Corinthians 13:11-13, Matthew 28:16-20

As a boy, entering my teenage years, I have very fond memories of the rector of my home church – David Macrow. He was a man of deep compassion, tireless energy, unselfish generosity and dry humor! His sermons, as I remember them, were rather more “churchy” than practical; he was fond of moving saints days to Sunday evenings (Yes! There was church on Sunday evenings! Evensong at 6:30 p.m. in the summer, 4:30 p.m. in the winter) so he would have a different topic for his second sermon of the day. More than 50 years later, I actually still remember a series of them! It was the ones he preached on Trinity Sunday.

He began it like this: *“Well, it’s Trinity Sunday, so I have to preach on the Trinity. Now you’re not going to understand it, because I don’t understand it, but we have to try!”*

And then, rather like a failed amphibious landing, he would assault the theology of the Trinity, throwing everything he had at it in a vain attempt to establish a meaningful beachhead!

Fr. Macrow is not alone, and never has been. Even famous theologians like the other Augustine – the one from Hippo who’s one of only 25 individuals in Christian history named a “Doctor of the Church” – even famous theologians like Augustine have gotten themselves tangled up trying to explain it!

Opaque philosophical musings, produced by small minority of church leaders, working “under the hammer,” under the watchful eye of the most powerful man in the known world – one who had armies at his beck and call as handy “persuaders”.....that doesn’t sound like any good basis for producing a readily accessible description of the great mystery that is God!

I believe its fair to say that we have reached a place today in our world where most religious philosophers and theologians accept that the doctrine of the Trinity is never going to provide a handy and useful tool for Christians when it comes to explaining what we mean when we say “God!”

Of course, that has never stopped them from trying! If you look up “systematic theologians” – they’re the one’s likely to try this – on Wikipedia you’ll find a list 60 pages long! And that’s just the best known ones.

We humans never like to be beaten by anything, so coming up with an explanation of God would be an almost irresistible challenge. And if anyone were successful, well, their name would go down in history.....

I think that another reason we keep trying to define God is because we human beings believe on some level that if we can define something, we can control it – and controlling anything is another of those almost irresistible challenges we can’t seem to ignore.

The truth is that there’s a mystery at the heart of our faith that’s beyond our limited human ability

to define, and for most of us, we'd only be able to scratch the surface of what "Trinity" means if we were to try. Better, it seems to me, to accept that the Trinity *is*, that we are the better for this acceptance, and that the act of trying to enter more deeply into Trinity requires us to accept that the mystery that is God will always elude us, at least while we're on this side of the river.

If we can do this, then today's readings – and especially the one from the book of Genesis – offer some fruitful insights. Genesis certainly calls us to that accepting response – it's about the wonders of divine creativity, the beauty of the universe, and God's imaginative artistry. Through the poetry of faith light can dawn. This creation, and the God at its heart, is good, good, very good.

I think we miss the reality of God behind this creation story, because the story itself is so beautiful. It's telling us who God is – or perhaps answering that age-old question of "who is God?"

And more obviously, it's also telling us about our origins – answering the other two age-old questions: "who are we?" "Where did we come from?"

The challenge we as Christians face today about this passage is from two sources: those who want to take it literally, and those who reject faith because they think the only way it can be understood is literally, because that's what some Christians continue to claim!!

The truth is that this story's obviously not a history, as we understand history today. And it's obviously not science, as we understand science today. It's poetry, hymn, doxology, and metaphor. So when those steeped in scientific method AND those who wish to take the story literally try to apply a literalist analysis to it – whether scientific or religious – it's rather like trying to claim that a fish it needs a bicycle!

The sort of scientific literalism that's represented by some of the more famous atheist scientists like Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens simply fails to understand what Genesis is really saying. The same is true – most ironically – with Christian fundamentalists! The ability of both groups to understand the message Genesis conveys has been inhibited because their post-Enlightenment imaginations have been impoverished.

We should pray to God that our imaginations aren't threatened in the same way!

To call the creation story true is not to quibble with science nor to agree with the fundamentalists; it's to probe deeper than any scientific endeavor can take us. It's to acknowledge who we truly are and where we really come from. It is to affirm, by faith, the reality of a good God, a good world, and a beloved humanity.

In just the same way, to call the idea of Trinity true is also to affirm, by faith, the reality of a good God, a good world, and a beloved humanity.

And in both cases it's to acknowledge that some truths are not accessible via human reason and

intellect, but by trust, and faith, and relationship.

Today, we called to what some have called “radical amazement” (Heschel), to stand in awe and wonder, to the quest for beauty, and love and joy; and we’re called to do this in the spirit of our Dynamic God. So today let’s “celebrate a God who is still creating, who speaks in diverse ways, whose creativity and redemption embraces all creation, and who challenges us to go beyond all divisive and exclusive theologies to affirm the wonders of God’s creative love” as we encounter them in the Creator-God, his Son Jesus, and in the Divine Spirit. (Bruce Epperly)