

Trinity Sunday
June 11, 2006
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You may be familiar with the poem, "The Blind Men and the Elephant."

It concerns six blind men who decide to satisfy their curiosities as to what an elephant is like. Upon arriving where the elephant was, each man approached it from a different stance. The first man, as he encountered the side of the elephant, said an elephant is like a wall. The second, as he felt the tusk, said that an elephant was like a spear. The third, taking the squirming trunk in his hands, offered the opinion that an elephant was like a snake. The fourth, touching the elephant's knee, said that it was like a tree. The fifth, feeling his ear, said that it was like a fan. And the sixth, grasping the tail, countered with the thought that an elephant was like a rope. Even though each man thought he was right, they were all wrong. What is sad about the poem is that despite their blindness, they could have gained a visual impression of an elephant by simply listening to each other.

When we try to understand what or who God is, it's important to remember that no single person has the ultimate answer. God has been and is revealed to each of us in different ways. And what's important is that we share our experiences with each other so we, as a body, can better experience the work of God in our lives.

That said, today *is* Trinity Sunday. A day that has been celebrated in the Christian church since the 10th century when ministers around the world try to address the understanding we have of God as three in one.

The doctrine of the Trinity does not attempt to explain God. It only explains in a very elemental way what God has revealed to us about God's self so far. So we Christians affirm the Trinity, not as an explanation of God, but simply as a way of describing what we know about God to this point. And "to this point" is an important part of that understanding.

The idea of the Trinity is not emphatically stated as a doctrine in scripture. It's not laid out and clearly stated that for all time, this is how we are to imagine God. Yet, by implication, it is stated many times in the Bible. In their religious dialogue, the early Christians discovered that they simply could not speak of God without speaking of the three ways in which God had been revealed to them—as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This does not mean that there are three Gods. It means that there is one God who has been shown to us in three ways.

First, we affirm God as Father. The issue is not whether or not God is male. The real question is, what *kind* of God do we know. What the doctrine of the Trinity says is that the same God who molded the universe also cares about what happens in the lives of each and every one of us. Not just out of curiosity, but in the way that a parent cares about what happens to his or her children.

Jesus referred to God as Abba—the Hebrew word for Daddy. If we could only think of God as that loving parent who waits patiently for us while we wander off to the far reaches of our lives and do our own thing, but who waits for us to come to our senses and is there to meet us at the door and joyfully take us back in.

It's easy to think of God as omnipotent, holy, righteous, all-powerful, a judge. But if our Christian understanding of the nature of God is to be more complete, then we must also learn to think of God as our kind, sympathetic, understanding, compassionate, gentle and loving parent.

Of course, life's experiences have a way of making any single image difficult for everyone to connect with. For many people, parents bring up not images of love and compassion, but of stern punishment or even mistreatment. So, for many people, the image of the *incarnate* God, of Jesus, speaks more clearly to the love of God that we know.

We say that God took on human form, came and lived among us, suffered the same trials that we suffer, experienced the same feelings that we experience. Jesus was not God. Jesus was God incarnate. There is a difference. Because Jesus never drew attention to himself. He always pointed to God.

Soren Kiekegard, the Danish theologian, tells a story of a prince who wanted to find a maiden suitable to be his queen. One day while running an errand in the local village for his father he passed through a poor neighborhood. As he glanced out the windows of the carriage his eyes fell upon a beautiful peasant maiden. During the ensuing days he often passed by the young lady and soon fell in love. But he had a problem. How would he know that she wanted to marry him out of love and not out of obligation or desire for his wealth and power?

The prince came up with a solution. He gave up his robes and moved into the village not as a prince, but as a peasant. He lived among the people, shared their interests and concerns, and spoke their language. In time, the maiden grew to love him for who he was and loved him because he had first loved her.

This story explains what we Christians mean by the incarnation. God came and lived among us so that we might come to know God in a new way. I am glad that this happened for two reasons: One, it shows that God is with us, that God is on our side, and that God loves us. Secondly, it gives us a first hand view of what the mind of God is really all about. When people ask what God is like, we as Christians point to the person of Jesus Christ. God is incomprehensible. But in Jesus this incomprehensible God is made knowable.

But again, for many, the image of God as an “other,” even in the person of Jesus, is difficult to conceive of. So, how about part of God as you? That is why we also affirm a belief in God revealed as Spirit. In the Creed as it is professed in the Korean Methodist Church, believers proclaim, “We believe in the Holy Spirit, God present with us for guidance, for comfort and for strength.” Put another way, the Holy Spirit is the infinite become intimate. It is the Beyond that is within. It is the realization of the presence of the Living God in the life of each individual.

Intimacy with God. That's what the Holy Spirit brings to our lives. Of course, we have to be careful not to identify the work of the Holy Spirit with our own deep feelings. The church has sanctioned some horrible behavior under the guise of "It seemed good to us and to the Holy Spirit." That is why we must always listen to each other.

The doctrine of the Trinity is re-interpreted, re-imagined, re-understood as each generation experiences God in a new way. And like six blind men trying to figure out what an elephant looks like, we need to remember to listen to each other. To listen to how God has been revealed to each of us.

Someone once asked Albert Einstein's wife if she understood her husband's theory of relativity. No, she said, but I know my husband. We cannot begin to fathom the incomprehensible mysteries of God, but that does not mean that we cannot know God. Whether it is as Father or Mother God, Brother or Sister God, Holy Spirit or Divine Presence, God Creator, God Redeemer, God Sanctifier, however we know God, we must seek to know and experience God. Intimately and Personally. The way that God seeks to know us. Amen.