

“Jesus’ Last Words”

Trinity Sunday/Peace with Justice Sunday

Matthew 28:16-20

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Matt. 28:16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Today is Trinity Sunday, the First Sunday after Pentecost. It is, in this time of unrest throughout our country, appropriately celebrated as ‘Peace with Justice Sunday’. Both Bishop Sharma Lewis and the bishops of the Southeastern Jurisdiction have addressed, in separate letters, our denomination’s response to the unrest and systemic racism. You will find these documents on the Virginia Conference website. <https://vaumc.org/bishop-lewis-calls-for-action-against-systemic-racism/>

Trinity Sunday is the day in which we celebrate the good news of the Triune God, the love that is shed abroad by our Savior, Jesus Christ. It is a time of joy in knowing that we are loved by God. We are created by the Father, taught by the Son, and sustained by the Holy Spirit. One God in three Persons. The Trinity is about the relationship within the Godhead, but also with us. Today’s Gospel Lesson is “*the New Testament’s most explicit trinitarian language. The passage does not spell out what trinitarian faith looks like. Perhaps this is the pattern we should emulate: we may confess the mystery without achieving complete understanding.*” (Prof. Greg Carey in *The Christian Century*, June 3, 2020 edition, *Living by the Word*).

If you were asked to explain the Trinity, what would you say? Many might first look to Genesis 1:26 and refer to “*Let us make humankind in our image...*” Most professors and scholars disagree and refute the idea that this is a reference to the Trinity. The Hebrew in this passages is *Elohim*, which is a common plural noun/name used for God in that there are many descriptive names (e.g. *Shaddai, Jehovah, El Elyon* etc.). It is a favorite question found on the application for clergy seeking Provisional Elder membership in the Virginia Conference. Though not asked to define Trinity in the Elder papers, we are asked how our understanding of the Trinity has grown as we serve in ministry. Asking one to explain the theology of the Trinity can be considered a ‘trick question’. Volumes have been written about it, but no one can completely wrap their minds around it. The Trinity is a mystery of the Christian faith. That’s one reason

many pastors this Trinity Sunday will choose one of the other lections on which to preach – most will use Genesis 1:1-2:4a.

As a child and adolescent, I was not familiar with the term. I grew up in the pre-United Methodist period and only learned that Jesus was God's Son and he loved children. During that same time frame, my father made sure we attended every religious service in our community. Since our church was part of a four-point charge, our ministries and services were very limited. Therefore, we supplemented our Christian education and worship through the local Southern Baptist Church whenever there were no programs at our church. I'll never forget their pastor's neck and reddened face with bulging veins – screaming from the pulpit, slamming his fist upon the podium, talking about the wrath of God and how we were all going to hell. For years I was afraid of God and would not enter a church alone and never at night.

When reaching adulthood, the terror of entering a church alone at night remained. I was familiar with the term Trinity, but had no comprehension of its complexity. It just meant that God had three names. The Father was the one who lived in heaven. Jesus was a human who lived, died, resurrected and ascended into heaven. The Holy Ghost (Spirit) remained that apparition “that was out to get me.”

Once I began studying Scripture, I was confronted with the mystery of the Trinity. As my faith deepened, the fear of the Holy Ghost began to wane as I began to understand that it was the Holy Spirit that was sent to comfort and teach me. I grasped for analogies to explain Trinity, but as you know all analogies are insufficient and fall far short. One of the most familiar, but faulty is water. It is often explained that water can be a liquid, a solid and a vapor. As I learned in seminary this analogy is ‘modal,’ meaning that it can be only one thing at a time. God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit at all times without changing the character or actions of the other. Other analogies include a fire that heats, lights and consumes all at the same time. Others have used family and gender to describe the Trinity – the man can be a son, husband, and father all at the same time, yet remaining an individual. The point is that the Trinity cannot be explained. It is a mystery. It is to be celebrated and imitated in unified relationships among us humans.

I appreciate a quote used by Rev. Dr. James Howell from Jeremy Begbie: *“If you sing a C, the note fills the whole room, no more in one place than another. If you add the E and then the G, each note fills the room, one doesn't crowd out the other — and the chord they form together are far more lovely than the single note. God the Trinity is like that.”*

These final words of Jesus in Matthew 28: 16-20 have much to say as Jesus meets his remaining eleven disciples on a mountain in Galilee, fulfilling his instructions given to the women in verses 7 and 10. Scripture tells us that when they saw him, they worshipped him while some doubted. Dr. Stanley Saunders says the *“Greek word ‘distazo’ carries a sense of standing in two places at*

the same time or being of two minds. Jesus commissions not perfect disciples, but people who both worship and doubt as they stand at the edge of the world that is passing away and the one that is coming to them.” With Jesus the old is passing away and a new day is dawning. Jesus declares that now (earlier Satan offered an easier route) all authority in heaven and on earth is his. He commissions them: *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you”*. The same is our commission, yet we must remember that **we cannot make** disciples. We can teach, but the decision to become a disciple is up to those whom we teach. We must remember the very last line of this pericope. Jesus is with us always, to the end of the age. Therefore, with Jesus’ presence, we are able to do all things. The Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit loves us and will never desert us though we may make that decision. The third Person of the Trinity lives, teaches and sustains us.

I’d like to close with these few sentences from the same source I quoted earlier by Prof, Greg Carey: *“At the end of the day, the doctrine of the Trinity is good news, worthy of celebration. It affirms the whole of the gospel: that the God who created the world, called Abraham and Sarah, blessed and healed in Jesus, and now empowers the church through the work of the Holy Spirit is one God. All these blessed realities constitute a whole. It also acknowledges the relationality core to the divine mystery. We worship a great and transcendent God, who from the beginning and throughout history draws near to humankind with love and blessing.”*

Therefore, today and everyday let us celebrate the Trinity, knowing that we will never fully understand it. It’s all about faith, unity and relationship with God and our fellow human being – regardless of the gender or race. All lives matter because we are made in the image of the Triune God. Amen? Amen.