

Sunday, June 11, 2017 – TRINITY SUNDAY

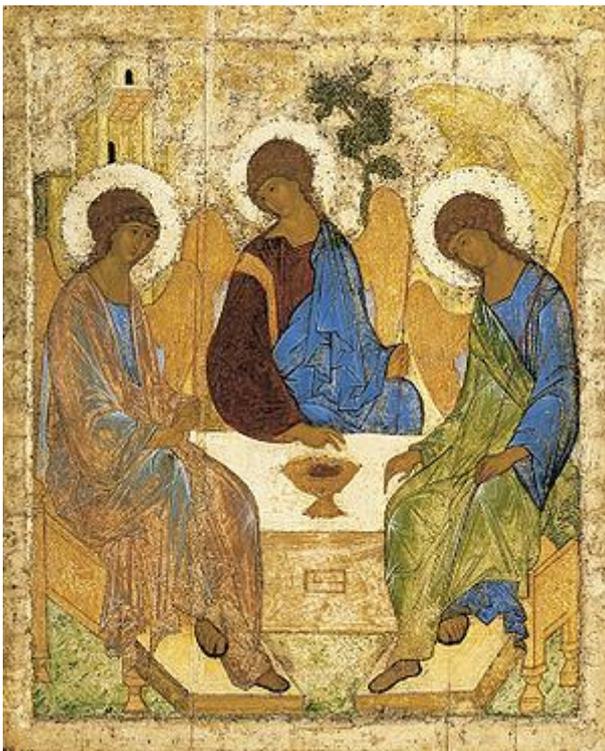
Preacher: Rev. Douglas J. Brouwer

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 13:11-13 and Matthew 28:16-20

Sermon title: “Finding the Trinity in the Bible – and in your life”

On the liturgical calendar, the Sunday following Pentecost is always Trinity Sunday, and it heralds the beginning of a very long season (called “ordinary time”) which stretches all the way to Advent. Most Christians would probably agree that the Trinity is an important doctrine, but could most Christians say why? In my sermon I want to ask a dangerous question – “so what?” I do not mean this in a dismissive way, the way one of your friends might dismiss Christian doctrines. I really want to know what difference the Trinity makes – not just in theological writing, but in our lives. Do you know? That would be a good place to start your thinking this week.

1. When we reflect on the Trinity, we are reflecting on the very nature of God. In western Christianity, the Trinity is usually depicted as a triangle (with a clearly implied hierarchy), while in eastern Christianity, interestingly, the Trinity is a circle (with no hierarchy). One of the most famous icons in eastern Christianity is by Andrei Rublev dating to 1411 or 1425 (depending on whom you ask). Whatever you think about icons (and some Christians have strong objections), I think it is helpful to see what the artist is trying to tell us about the Trinity. Without going into too much detail, what Rublev depicts is the visit of three angels to Abraham (the story is told in Genesis 18). The angels are sitting at a table together, and the composition is clearly a circle with no hierarchy. Here it is (if this image does not reproduce, have a look at Wikipedia)...



2. So, not only do the members of the Trinity exist in perfect fellowship, they also seem to have perfect equality. In eastern Christianity, this is supposed to be the model for perfect relationships among human beings. What happens if there is a hierarchy within the Trinity, with one person being more important or powerful than another? Doesn't this understanding also have implications for our relationships with each other? I suppose the question here is: What does the Trinity teach us about living together in perfect harmony with each other?

3. Maybe you've had enough references to eastern Christianity, but I can't resist one more you should know about. John of Damascus, a Greek theologian who lived in the seventh century, developed his understanding of the Trinity through the word *perichoresis* which literally means that the three persons are "dancing around." They are like three dancers holding hands, dancing in perfect harmonious, joyful freedom. One reason I point this out to you is that William P. Young, a Canadian writer, also tried to describe the Trinity (in 2007) not in an icon, but in a novel. The main character, Mackenzie Allen Phillips, goes to a shack and encounters three people: **God the Father** takes the form of an African American woman, **Jesus Christ** is a middle-eastern carpenter, and the **holy Spirit** is an Asian woman named Sarayu. If you haven't read this book, this can be jolting information! As you perhaps know, the book (and now the movie) has stirred lots of conversation and plenty of criticism. What interests me, however, as with the Rublev icon, is what the artist (in this case the novelist) is trying to say about the nature of God. Do you find this a helpful way to understand God? Why or why not?
4. As you probably know, the word "trinity" occurs nowhere in the Bible, which can be troubling to some believers. The idea of "trinity" is troubling to both Jews and Muslims, who cannot reconcile the idea with their insistence on "one God" or monotheism. If the word "trinity" can be found nowhere in scripture, then how did early believers come to the conclusion that there was a Trinity? Actually, the trinitarian formula does occur in scripture in a few places – including the NT reading for Sunday (Matthew 28:219). Another example is 2 Corinthians 13:14 or Romans 14:17-18. Clearly, Paul was already thinking in terms of a God who existed in three distinct persons. But, perhaps just as helpful, are those places in the Bible where God clearly seems to have a plural identity. Genesis 1:26-27 provides one of the more interesting examples where God refers to "himself" in the plural ... "let us make human beings in our image." Other places – in the New Testament – also clearly point to complicated identity. John 10:30 has Jesus saying, "I and the Father are one."
5. As you can imagine, the doctrine of the Trinity took many years to develop. Even the Nicene Creed, which is keen to describe who Jesus is, says very little (in comparison) about the holy Spirit. Do you know of any of the heresies involving the Trinity that the early believers had to counter? Are there aspects of the Trinity that are difficult for you to understand? Perhaps this quote from John Wesley sums up the problem: **"Bring me a worm that can comprehend a man, and then I will show you a man that can comprehend the Triune God."** - John Wesley