

# Preaching Trinity Sunday

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Jay Sidebotham,  
Rector of the Church of the Holy Spirit in Lake Forest, Illinois  
at the eleven o'clock service, June 19, 2011, Trinity Sunday.  
Based on Matthew 28:16-20.*

It's great to be back with you to preach on Trinity Sunday. I was privileged to serve here for a number of years, beginning in 1999 B.C. (before chairs). We enjoy our life in Chicago, and while I look forward to telling you about what the Holy Spirit is doing in our midst during our Forum hour, Frances and I do miss New York. And we miss you. It's good to be with you on this one Sunday of the church year focused on a belief, a doctrine of the church that for many people generates feelings of confusion or sometimes indifference. I've learned over the years that it's a great day to invite a guest preacher. So bear with me as I try to figure out what it means to preach Trinity Sunday.

When I was in New York, I was privileged to study with Christopher Morse at Union Seminary. He was such a stellar teacher that he got me to sign up for a course called "Dogmatics," which might sound to some like scheduling root canal on vacation. I'll never forget the vision Dr. Morse gave for dogma, for the doctrines of the church. He described them as buoy markers on the surface of the sea, pointing to depths beyond apprehension, guiding us in the journey so often marked by mystery. They are not the thing themselves, not objects of worship. The gift of buoy markers, like the doctrine of the Trinity, is that they serve as invitations, inklings, signs pointing to the reality of God—revealing deep truths about ourselves, helping us navigate the journey of life which we all know is sometimes kind of tricky.

I've gone through many Trinity Sundays, and heard all kinds of goofy explanations about why it matters and how it works. The logistics, physics, images, metaphors, mechanics are not as interesting to me as the deep reality to which the Trinity points, reflected in the opening verses of Genesis, where God speaks to a heavenly council and says, "Let us create." From the beginning, God exists in community. By nature, God is community. In God's very being, at the heart of the universe, there is not isolation but relationship. Martin Smith, a priest in the diocese of Washington, wrote a wonderful book about praying with scripture, a book called *The Word is Very Near You*. That book includes a chapter which changed my prayer life. The chapter is titled "God is a conversation." Martin Smith notes the amazing privilege that we are invited into the ongoing conversation already and always taking place in the Trinity. The word *conversation* not only suggests communication and relationship. It's close to the word *conversion*, suggesting change and growth. The doctrine of the Trinity invites us into a community where we will grow. Lord knows we need it.

We live in a time of lots of communication. But community, not so much. A parishioner emailed me not too long ago. He said, "I'm sitting in my office in the basement of my house, working on my computer. I get an email from my wife in her office upstairs, asking for directions to the soccer game for our kid." He asks, "Is there something wrong with our modern family? I emailed my wife in her office upstairs to ask what she thought." It was for me a parable. I got a vision of all of us communicating a lot, but that's not the same as finding community.

At its best, when it's doing and being what it's called to do and be, the church affirms a God who is community. As such, the church becomes a place where we find community. I heard this week from a colleague a story from Joplin, Missouri, where the Episcopal Church in town survived the recent tornado with little damage. The Reformed Episcopal Church, on the other hand, was completely destroyed. The two churches had split decades ago, in another kind of storm, when the new Prayer Book came out. The people of the Reformed Church considered it meet and right to hold on to the 1928 Prayer Book. It was a painful break, the kind of break in community that happens too

often in the church. After the tornado, the Rector of the Episcopal Church apparently contacted the Rector of the Reformed Episcopal Church, offering his worship space to the congregation. The Rector of the Episcopal Church worked with his parishioners to find enough 1928 Prayer Books so that their guests would be able to worship the Lord in the beauty of the liturgy they cared so much about. The Reformed folks were unfeignedly thankful. The fight was over. It was no longer about doctrine or liturgy or agreement or being right. It was about realizing community, even and especially in devastation. In the rubble, those churches reflected the nature of a God who is a community of love. They preached Trinity Sunday. What are the opportunities for St. Bart's to find that?

There's poignancy in the invitation to be with you today on Father's Day. The last time I was here was for my father's funeral last August. My father was a lifelong New Yorker, an ad guy from the Madmen era. For the last half of his life, his spiritual journey did not unfold in the church. The doctrine, the dogma, delivered with a heavy dose of judgment and hypocrisy that probably always marks religious organizations, got to be too much. The beach, the Atlantic Ocean, was his place of worship. But when his life ended suddenly, it was to the church that we turned. He felt at home at St. Bart's. He didn't love the dogma of organized religion. He saw its foibles clearly. But he admired the Rector, and liked the Vicar and sensed in this whole community the grace and acceptance of God which is the hallmark of the gospel, a wideness to God's mercy like the wideness of the ocean he loved. St. Bart's knows everybody needs a place. You gave our family a place. What I found when I came knocking on the door asking for help was that this place provided welcome and community. For that holy hospitality, I am forever grateful. You preached Trinity Sunday.

But I'm not the only one on the receiving end. That welcome and community was part of our common life in the days following 9/11 when folks covered in ash and dust staggered into our building, folks without community finding community. Folks without a prayer life finding one. They may not have embraced the creed, but they embraced the deep truths behind the creed. In the end, it's about community. And relationship. I remember the blackout, when we posted a hand written sign that said, "The church is open," and realized the depth of that statement. I remember handing out lemonade on the sidewalk and the young New Yorker who looked up at our grand entrance and said, "Am I allowed to go in there?"

Not only allowed. Invited. By the God of creation, by the word made flesh, by the one whose spirit still moves with power among us. We are each and all called to live in deep relationship with the God understood in the language of the Trinity, to preach Trinity Sunday in word and action. Despite what Mark Twain said, we are called to believe, but with this angle. We're called to claim it as creed, which is really about giving our heart, knowing that the word "creed" has the same root as the word "heart." We're called to let the mystery of God's nature guide us across deep, mysterious waters. When we do that, we find ourselves drawn into community, into relationship with a God who never leaves us alone. And in a world marked by isolation and division, we are called to shape communities reflective of the community that is God. You have been doing that, and I know under Bill and then Buddy's leadership in days ahead you will continue to do that. But it takes faithful intention, always asking questions. So let me add this to the questions that circle Trinity Sunday: What would it mean for us to find new ways to give our hearts to God who lovingly invites us into an ongoing conversation, who meets us where we are but loves us too much to leave us there, who calls us to share that love with a world hungry for, dying for, community? What would it mean to continue to build communities that reflect the nature of God, who is love? What would it mean for all of us to preach Trinity Sunday, if necessary to use words? It matters because, after all, as you have figured out, everybody needs a place to come to know that kind of love.

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