

Drawing God

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Matthew J. Moretz, Associate Rector,
at the eleven o'clock service, June 6, 2012.
The First Sunday after Pentecost: Trinity Sunday.
Based on John 3:1-17.*

The late chaplain at Harvard, Peter Gomes, used to tell the story of a little girl who could have been in any church's Sunday School. One morning, before class, she was found to be in a corner sprawled upon a large piece of paper, with every possible color of crayon scattered about and at her disposal, and she was drawing with all of her might. The teacher approached her to ask, "What are you drawing, my dear?" And the girl said, "I am drawing a picture of God." Her teacher replied, "But, sweetheart, nobody knows what God looks like." Without looking up from her work, she said, "They will when I'm finished!"

Audacious, yes. But her confidence is no less audacious than the work of the Church. Everything we do as a church is not far removed from the little girl's picture of God. We may not use crayons and butcher paper, but we use every tool at our disposal to draw the big picture of God. In this service alone our crayons are our biblical readings, hymns, ancient prayers and contemporary, stained glass, statuary, mosaics, woodworking, architecture, rhetoric, parades, gardening, fashion design, liturgical logistical coordination, choral music, organ music, food and drink, hugs and kisses, and, now that the pews are gone, up front just a little bit of upholstery!

And we whip it all together into an operatic sequence of such grandeur. Strike that. Opera doesn't have anything on the church! You thought the Ring Cycle was long? Pfft! That's just a tetralogy! The Church's cycle, counting Holy Week, has us putting on a one hundred and sixty five-part show every three years! And the show is performed live in thousands of locations around the planet! Let's see the Met pull that off! As a priest, I'm somewhere in the start of my third show. And, I have to tell you, it really rewards repeat viewing.

If I had to point to the best picture of God that the Church draws, it would be that performance: with a breadth and depth that rivals most anything else. But if I had to point to the best 'shorthand' sketch of God that the Church draws, it would have to be the Holy Trinity. We inscribe that name on our bodies when we cross ourselves with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Now today happens to be Trinity Sunday, the only day, it is said, on the Christian calendar that is set aside to celebrate a holy idea, rather than celebrate a holy person or a holy event. This holy idea was carefully developed through anguished debate in the first centuries of the Church. This formula is shared by all Christians and has been established in our creeds. It is a teaching that draws out the complete unity of the three divine persons of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. These are three complete ways to speak about God, and each is completely one with the other in a lively dance.

Yet the Trinity is so intimidating because if you try to describe it in any detail, one of the persons of the Trinity can get short shrift. Like a living thing, the more you dissect it, the less it lives.

But no matter. Like that little girl, I want to draw out a picture for you of God that you can take home today and put on the refrigerator.

My favorite image, lately, of the Trinity is the Sherwin-Williams logo. Do you remember this? It is a graphic of a great paint can pouring red paint all over the blue globe of the earth. It is a horrible environmental image, but it works nicely as an animation of how God as Trinity works: God pours out Godself for the whole world. In my crude picture, the Father is the heavenly paint can, the Son is the spot where the paint first connects with the earth in the life, death and Resurrection of Christ, and the Spirit is the paint steadily covering the earth with the reality of God through her work.

They say that the Trinity is an idea. A puzzling and paradoxical one at that. To say “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” is to bring up not a math problem, but a story: *our* story, our experience of God, a story of such particularity that is so much more unsettling than the serene philosophical names of “omniscient,” “omnipotent,” “omnipresent.”

These names seem fair enough for God, even familiar. But when you relate to God as an “omni-God,” God becomes the highest part of every hierarchy. Distant. Removed. Just another aspect of the powers that be. And this “omni-God” is saddled with all kinds of demands that if God is to be God, that God must be changeless, bodiless, and free from suffering. An omni-God is just a heavenly paint can. But this is not the witness of our people. We have seen the Lord. We have seen the can turned upside-down, and we witness it spilling over the whole planet. The living God that we Christians have witnessed in history and proclaimed for centuries moves among us through spirit and flesh, responding, changing, suffering with us and for us, dwelling with us through our own lives, deaths, and new lives of rebirth. We saw the can tip over during the single tangible life of Jesus Christ.

Our experience as a people has shown us that God is found in the Father, the one Source of all that is, with a special relationship to Abraham and Sarah and their successors. The Father saved that family from the horror of sacrifice and much later from the horrors of slavery. The prophets and visionaries could tell that the can was tipping, and they perceived this coming reality again and again. God was then found fully in Jesus the Christ of Nazareth, a flesh and blood creature on this Earth, faithful to the end, crucified by the greatest power on earth, and yet still alive. AND Jesus’ presence is with us fully in the Holy Spirit, given to the Church upon Jesus’ departure, poured out in wind and fire and universality across the globe. And these three experiences of God that the Church has had are somehow experiences of the same One God.

There is one way of talking about the Trinity that sounds too idyllic and platonic to me: the Lover, the Beloved, and Love itself. It is fine, I suppose, but not gritty enough for God as God is. The real Christian Trinity complicates the temptation to make God simple and abstract and safe. The Trinity complicates things by pointing to a specific story, hardly serene at all, peppered, in fact, with hardship and brutality, taking place on earth, and in history, whereby God is completely revealed.

The Father gives the Son to the World. The Son prays to the Father, Abba, at Gethsemane. The World rejects the Son, but the Son is unstoppable. The Son gives the Spirit to the disciples and the world at Pentecost. The Trinity is in relationship with itself. One cannot be understood without the other. And they can’t possibly be understood fully without reference to the Gospel story. The Trinity is not a math problem to be solved; it is the greatest story ever told.

If you look at the logo closely, there is still more paint in the can to pour, and there is still more of the earth to be covered. The Trinity is not finished with our world just yet. And the Trinity is not finished with you!

Perhaps you have had experiences of God that suggest God’s Trinity? You’ve experienced God as One that you pray to as a heavenly Source. Or you have found God reaching you through Jesus’ parables or his life’s story. Or perhaps the Holy Spirit has helped you to experience God’s presence in a friend, in an enemy, in bread and wine. But these three avenues run parallel and are really one great road. If you walk that road with God the Three in One, you will pour your lives out in love for the world, covering it with your care and prayerful concern, and the story of the Trinity will become your story. Your life will draw the big picture of God.

And when you are finished, the world will know what God looks like.

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