

Psalm 8
Matthew 28:16-20

Trinity Sunday
Midway Presbyterian Church
June 11, 2017

The Great Commission

Introduction to the Psalm

Our Psalm for today is a hymn, distinct from others in its direct address to God. It holds together the majestic sovereignty of God with the granted dignity of humankind. Listen to these words from Psalm 8 . . .

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

The Lectionary's gospel lesson for this Trinity Sunday was no doubt chosen because it includes the baptismal formula of the three persons of the Holy Trinity. The lesson presents the Great Commission which Jesus gave his disciples and concludes with a promise. Hear these words from Matthew 28:16-20 . . .

Sermon

Someone said that Trinity Sunday has been the bane of preachers for a long time. And that in large churches the Senior Pastor will often ask one of the associates to preach on this Sunday that follows Pentecost Sunday. I can understand that reluctance because when we come to the Trinity, we come to the sublime mystery of One God in Three Persons.

But it would be a mistake to think that the verse in our gospel lesson which includes instructions for baptism in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, reflects a fully developed doctrine of the Holy Trinity as found in the Nicene or Apostle's Creed.

Although the doctrine of the Trinity is one of the earliest doctrines of the church, it came from the practice and experience of the church, not from academic theologians. The first Christians were Jews who strongly believed in a God who is the creator and sustainer of all.

Through an encounter with Jesus, they became aware that through him, God lived among them. And after Jesus left and ascended into heaven, they were not abandoned. Through Pentecost and other experiences they were instructed, inspired, and comforted by One they came to call the “Holy Spirit.” Thus, the early church began to bless one another with the words Paul often used: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” One God, experienced and known in three ways.

Saint Columban was a seventh century Irish missionary who labored on the European continent. In speaking of the Trinity he first asked, “Who then is God?” And his answer: “He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” Then he offered this counsel:

“Do not look for any further answers concerning God. As the depths of the seas are invisible to human sight, so the Godhead of the Trinity is found to be beyond the grasp of human understanding...Just believe.” (Lambert Reilly, *Because There Is Jesus*, pp. 65-66)

In Pakistan today Ms. Veeda Javaid is the director of the Pakistan Presbyterian Education Board. In 1998 the government began handing back terribly deteriorated schools taken from the church thirty years earlier—schools that the government had been unable to finance and run. Practical people asked Veeda why the Presbyterian church should take the schools back when they didn’t have the money or community support to run them. She answered by saying:

“We can do no less. Who created these beautiful Christian and Muslim children in remote areas of Pakistan? God. Who showed us how to love them? Jesus. Who stands with us every day as we work to make the schools run again? The Holy Spirit.”

While we cannot find the doctrine of the Holy Trinity itself spelled out in Scripture, we can find there the *roots* of the doctrine—affirmations about God, which forced the church to ask questions which led it to formulate the doctrine. And Matthew’s closing words can be instructive for us today.

It may help us to identify with the eleven disciples of Matthew 28 when we find that some experienced doubt. Even the sight of Jesus did not remove all of their uncertainties or answer all their questions. The truth is that the disciples knew both adoration and indecision, faith and puzzlement. Their doubt, however, does not exclude them from Jesus' plans. For to these very disciples, he will give the Great Commission.

The disciples have gone to an unknown mountain in Galilee as instructed by Jesus following the Resurrection (Mt 28:10). Jesus comes to them and announces his commission to them, based on the authority that has been granted him. They are told what to do by One in Whom they have known a power beyond anything they could ever imagine. The power to heal all manner of disease. The power to raise the dead. The power to forgive. Their mission will not be jeopardized by their doubt, nor limited by their uncertainties, for it comes from One who has been given the same majestic sovereignty of Psalm 8 by the Father.

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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. (Mt. 28:18b-20a)

Make disciples of all nations. Without rejecting the place of Israel, their mission is broadened to include Gentiles, for they too are within the scope of God's love and care.

Then we hear of two distinct elements of their commission: the first baptism, and the second teaching. Baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. If we baptize only in the name of the Father, that would neglect the work and person of Christ and the ongoing activity of the Spirit. It would not present a full picture of who God is. We would be baptized into the fullness of a very mysterious, powerful, but perhaps detached God.

But what if we baptize only in the name of the Son? That would neglect the glory and sovereignty of “God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth.” (*The Apostles’ Creed*) It would also omit the Holy Spirit, the ongoing presence of God with us.

But what if we baptize only in the name of the Holy Spirit. That would omit the awesomeness of the Father who created all that is. It would neglect the redemptive work of Christ the Son, who came to seek and to save the lost, who expressed the love of God the Father, faithful even to death on the cross.

When we go forth to make disciples and baptize, we do so in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One of my favorite professors at Columbia Seminary was Shirley Guthrie. In his book, *Christian Doctrine* (which by the way, is in our church library), Dr. Guthrie states:

The same God who is God *over* us as God the Father and Creator, and God *with* and *for* us as the Incarnate Word and Son, is also God *in* and *among* us as God the Holy Spirit. (p. 80)

In his book, *A Dresser of sycamore Trees*, Vermont minister Garret Keizer tells about an Easter vigil he conducted in his small church. Only a couple of people were in attendance, but Keizer nonetheless lit the paschal candle and said the prayer. “The candle sputters in the half darkness, like a voice too embarrassed or overwhelmed to proclaim the news: ‘Christ is risen.’”

And then he says:

But it catches fire, and there we are, three people and a flickering light in an old church on a Saturday evening in the spring, with the noise of the cars and their winter rusted mufflers outside. The moment is filled with ambiguities of all such quiet observances among few people, in the midst of an oblivious population in a radically secular age. The act is so ambiguous because its terms are so extreme: the Lord is with us, or we are pathetic fools.

And so we go out into the world with our faith and our doubts, an incomplete understanding of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, members of a small church. But we go out with all that Jesus has taught us, assured by the promise of Christ's presence and therefore confident that we are *not* pathetic fools.

If you are sitting in the congregation today, feeling isolated, alone, hopeless, or fearful, your baptism can be a source of joy and comfort. Whether sprinkled or immersed, we have been brought into the whole being of God. We are members of *his* church, sheep of *his* flock, children of the heavenly Father.

We are to baptize *and* we are to teach.

...teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. (28:20a)

And Jesus practiced what he preached. Lamar Williamson taught at Union Seminary's School of Christian Education. In his commentary on *The Gospel of Mark*, he says that in this gospel, Jesus and his disciples are engaged in far more teaching than preaching. Jesus taught in parables. He taught about marriage and children. He taught about riches.

While disciples may not feel up to the task of fulfilling the Great Commission, Jesus gives us the promise of his abiding presence. A small church can be blessed by recalling that Jesus' name is Emmanuel, God with us (Mt. 1:23). By the assurance that where even two or three gather in worship, Jesus will be present (18:20). And now with this commitment of Jesus to walk with us day by day, to the very end.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.