

Distraction From Discipleship

Genesis 1:26 - 2:3 Matthew 28: 16-20

Today is Trinity Sunday. It is the day when the church is supposed to at least acknowledge the Trinity, an idea that is reflected in a variety of places in scripture but is never explicitly defined, at least in scripture. The doctrinal definition of the Trinity doesn't actually get produced until the early 4th century at the Council of Nicaea which formulated the Nicene Creed. However, there were several centuries of discussion about that phrasing which we hear in scripture, like in Matthew 28's Great Commission and in the baptismal ritual, which goes *in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit*.

My lectionary commentary starts: *Trinity Sunday has been the bane of preachers for generations. Senior pastors regularly dump the preaching for this Sunday on their junior associates. All Christian clergy seemingly struggle with understanding and articulating the divine mystery of the Trinity at some point in their ministries.* From there, the commentator takes me on a journey of the intricately contradictory and complementary understandings of the Trinity. At the end, it closes this way: *By now, we are all shaking out heads at the incomprehensibility of it all.* I have not had some sudden new insight, and I also doubt that you would gain much benefit from such an exercise. You can thank me later.

There is one alternative view of the Trinity worth sharing. The same commentator noted that Meister Eckhart, a 14th century German mystic, had his own thoughts. "He wrote that God the Father laughed, and the Son was born. Then the two of them laughed and the Spirit was born. When all three laughed, the human being was born." Genius!

These kinds of arguments and issues can be helpful sometimes, but generally they don't help you or me in our daily walk in seeking to be faithful. Some folks seem to feel that such matters must be understood in order to make that faithful walk. I'm not so inclined. I appreciate the folks who have labored to understand it, and the historic legacy that produced it, but at the end of the day, something like the Trinity is still called a mystery. Further debate is not going to make it less mysterious. And it can only serve as a distraction for those of us who would prefer to know about matters of discipleship.

But that isn't the only distraction. Sometimes traditions can lead into unhelpful distractions from the simple, basic message to which the scriptures bear witness.

The lectionary set me up with a couple of passages that make reference to the three persons of God for the sake of Trinity Sunday. It starts with the First Creation Story. This story is quite obviously distinct from the Second Creation Story which stars Adam, Eve, and a serpent, and is a lot more fun. The First Creation Story stars God, a calendar, and all the stuff in the created world, including creeping things. (Creeping things keep popping up and appear to have been a favorite character of a fellow we know

as the priestly editor who makes sure creeping things are added into the narrative at every opportunity.)

While the First Creation Story lacks serpents and drama and naked bodies, it does have noteworthy phrases within it that continues to be abused by Christians in both religious and in political spheres today. It comes in vs. 28: *God blessed [the human creatures], and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'* The key expressions here are *fill the earth and **subdue it*** and *have **dominion over** [everything]*. These expressions are regularly invoked to justify the most egregious acts against the environment. "Subdue" gets to mean "subjugate" while "dominion" gets corrupted into "dominate." In other words, these expressions make it not only permissible to harm the environment, exploit it, trash it, and ruin it, but make it a divine commandment to do whatever we feel we need to do for our betterment. That's totally, TOTALLY wrong. Let's look and see what these expressions really mean.

This part of our passage from the First Creation Story is concerned with the human creation – day six. God has created all other things and placed them in a particular order in the preceding five days. Then God hatches this great idea (at the time, anyway) with the divine council – "Let us" – to create human beings. What better model to create these human beings than the heavenly beings, hence in the image of God? Bearing the image of God, we immediately recognize the connection that the human creature is representative of God. I don't say this as a matter of substance in the Trinitarian sense, as if humans are similar in substance to God. More like, humans are the representation of God as an image in a mirror is the image of the one who is looking in the mirror. This is a matter of close relationship in representation.

This is important because then come those words, *and let them have dominion* over this wondrous creation. "Dominion" here would also be a reflection of how God has dominion over humans and over the rest of God's creation. God has dominion, but God does not dominate. Rather we recognize the freedom of humans in their relationship with God and with other humans and with all of creation. God has dominion as a king has dominion. And we know that God has not favorably regarded kings who are dominating. Rather, "dominion" reflects the responsibility to care for and administer affairs to the best interests of all, like a good king would do. Yes, this what God would do, and this would be God's expectation in giving "dominion" of the creation to the humans. Domination, on the other hand, like a master over a slave, would be the *opposite* of what God was expecting.

At this point, God is talking out loud, so to speak, about God's plans. Then God does the creating of humans in vs. 28, and issues the humans this charge: *God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.* We have that "have dominion over" clause again, but we also have the phrase *fill the earth and subdue it*. As before, the corruption of "subdue" to mean "subjugate" is like believing that "dominion" means "dominate."

This notion of “subduing” the earth becomes quite relevant when you continue reading and God adds that every seed-bearing plant and tree with fruit and its seeds are given to humans for food. (You’ll note **not** animals.) As you all know well, agriculture requires subduing the earth, making it into a form that will provide plants and trees and be able to produce food. That’s the kind of subduing that’s referred to *in context*. It is **not** to subjugate, to master or enslave or exploit for one’s enrichment. It is to subdue it, to make it useable for producing food.

In the abusive interpretation of the First Creation Story, the justification for environment degradation and wanton exploitation can distract from the proper role of exercising judicious responsibility and understanding the aims of making it possible for the creation to produce food suitable for the human creation. As I said before, preachers and politicians and other apologists for reckless devastation of natural resources have distracted good people of faith from their proper role as worthy and faithful stewards of creation. That role is the function of the faithful disciple who must also be an advocate for worthy and faithful stewardship, particularly in light of those authorities who, for whatever reason, are content to let power and greed dictate our environmental future.

Let’s look at another distraction that comes in the so-called Great Commission that comes at the end of Matthew’s gospel in Jesus’ parting words to his disciples. Here they are: *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.* That phrase “make disciples” has been the reasoning behind those who feel compelled to turn every person they encounter into a Christian. Of course, there is a world of difference between “make disciples” and “make Christians.”

Disciples are followers, students, learners, those who are embracing a certain teaching. This notion of student-disciples learning and being taught connects nicely with the second part of that sentence: *teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.* You’ll notice that nothing in there commands people to become Christians. Nothing requires the conversion of the world. Where it says, *of all nations*, the word “nations” also means “peoples.” This does not mean conquering the world for Jesus. Rather it connects with Jesus’ clearly and repeatedly articulated commandment that invites all people, ALL people, into the covenant of new life. There are no restrictions on following Jesus and his teachings, no requirements, no laws, no rules, and no exclusions. Even Samaritans, prostitutes, tax collectors, the diseased, foreigners, the unclean, the poor, the mentally ill, the outcasts, the lepers, **all** people can learn about Jesus, learn from his teachings, and follow Jesus on the Kingdom path into the covenant of new life.

The distraction that corrupts this passage into a crusade about saving people for Jesus, saving them from the eternal torment of hell, takes away from the true purpose of discipleship that Jesus did teach. We don’t find Jesus spending lots of time teaching techniques for conversion of the heathen. We do find Jesus spending lots of time teaching about healing, loving, compassion, caring for the neediest, welcoming the

loathsome and hated, embracing your enemies with love and gracious forgiveness, and working for peace, justice, and new life. Instead of doing these critical things which would be a blessing of witness to Jesus and offer the greatest praise to the Lord, millions of Christians ignore all that good stuff and pursue paths that are embarrassingly irrelevant to what Jesus actually taught.

I got [an offer in my Facebook feed](#) from a church growth operation just last night. It said: *When Jesus gave the church the commission to make disciples, he gave us growth as a metric.* No, he didn't. Only in a corrupted version of this scripture do we get the crusader model of ministry. The instruction to baptize is to formalize the process of learning in discipleship by becoming part of the body of faithful witnesses, part of the Body of Christ in the world.

It continues: *Part of the disciple-making process is inspiring people to make more disciples.* Again: no, it doesn't. As you act as a witness to the love, sacrifice, grace, and new life in Jesus by serving others, ministering as Jesus ministered, and ministering to those whom Jesus ministered, then people will become disciples. That's actually how Jesus did it, except with his first disciples apparently. Peoples' heads were turned and their attitudes changed when they found in Jesus a model of love and grace, of justice and peace, who talked about new ways of living, who talked about new life for those who would turn, change, and follow him, following his example of ministry.

Disciples like us are called to minister and serve like Jesus did, with the kind of people to whom Jesus ministered. The big distraction is do something that Jesus did not teach, and to contrive a whole unhelpful theology around the distraction that leads people to do many, many things that are nothing like what Jesus did.

I suppose the idea was for me to preach about the Trinity on Trinity Sunday, but that doctrine in this day and time seems to be nothing more than a big distraction. Big distractions like that can divert us from the purpose and promise of Jesus' ministry. Instead of dealing with his challenging teachings, pushing ourselves along paths of service and ministry, siren voices come calling from the world's distortions and corruptions to do something that is someone else's idea of ministry, not Jesus's.

Let me at least wrap up with a nice Trinitarian ending:

- God the Creator made humans responsible for God's creation, that we should reflect God's care for it just as we reflect God's image in our being.
- Jesus our Savior taught us to do what he did, to learn from his teachings, and by our witness in actions and modeling his way, welcome all people to the Lord's covenant promise of new life in him.
- The Holy Spirit was there in the beginning and is here with us now, to provide wisdom and counsel in being faithful in all things, and to empowered by faith to act in the name of Jesus in miracles and wonders.

Let us focus on these things always, and do all that we can to keep the distractions out of the way of our discipleship.