

MORAL WAFFLING

A Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on Trinity Sunday, June 11, 2017

Lectionary Readings: Genesis 1:1-5 and Genesis 1:26, 2:4.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Trinity Concept Came Late, Only in the Fourth Century

If you haven't noticed from the Bulletin or that first hymn, today is Trinity Sunday, the final Sunday of the church year. I've had three people this past week ask me, "What are you preaching on this coming Sunday?" To all three, I answered that the sermon title is "Moral Waffling," something I'm good at. Astoundingly, all three said, "Oh, I don't waffle." Well okay, you know who you are, all three of you.

So today is Trinity Sunday. Put into context, two Sundays ago was Ascension Sunday, in which we recognize Jesus ascending into heaven. Then came Pentecost last Sunday, and now Trinity Sunday. Next we enter excitedly into what the church calls "ordinary time," all the way up until December.

The teaching about the Trinity, as most of you know, wasn't settled until around the Fourth Century. The word Trinity never found its way into either the Old or the New Testament. But the doctrine, as it finally came to be understood, rested upon various scriptures in the interplay of Jesus with God the Father along with the Holy Spirit. For example, at the very end of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says to the disciples, "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.

Books and articles and sermons on the Trinity abound enough to fill a stadium. If you want to study it, knock yourself out. The difficulty with the Trinity is, of course, the math. One does not equal three; three does not equal one. So some fancy maneuvering had to take place, and one of the insights as a result of some of that maneuvering had to do with our final hymn, "God in Three Persons."

Actors in Greek Tragedies Are the Source of the Idea of the Trinity

I told you this before, but let me briefly remind you that the concept of the Trinity derives from the Greek tragedies and the way in which actors would play their several roles. This was determined by which mask they would hold in front of their faces as they recited lines from any given character in the play. Often they would have at least two and sometimes five or six masks held behind their backs. Individual actors would then put the one up in front of their face for the character they were playing at any given moment.

Those masks were called *persona*, and from there, the church fathers of the time said, "We get it." There's one God presenting in different ways: God the Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer, Father, Son, Spirit. It's a good

analogy for understanding. So they settled on the three at the First Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325. Hinduism says that God presents in thousands of ways. Islam and Judaism said let's stick with hard-core monotheism and not get into the three at all. Christianity found its way sort of in between the three.

We see this in our lives as well. Each one of us presents in multiple different ways. Using myself as an example, "Hi, I'm Art, the minister. Hi, I'm Art, the father, the husband. I'm Art, the tennis player. I'm Art, the hard-core biker. I'm Art, the theologian wannabe. I'm Art, the rock star wannabe, except that I can't play a single instrument." The point is that we all have multiple roles, so don't be surprised when God does too, especially when the role is unexpected or startling or new.

One of the Insights Is Deep: **Within the Oneness, Relationship**

So that's one of the insights from the Trinity, and that's actually the trivial one. Here's the better one. It's way deep. I'll say it in four words: "Within the oneness, relationship." I repeat, "Within the oneness, relationship." This is the insight that physics is making plain—everything is related to everything else, no matter whether elementary particles or atoms or fields or everything in the biosphere or stars or galaxies. Everything is related, affecting and being affected by everything else.

This concept in physics has two names: One is "nonlocality," meaning that there is no such thing as just a local event. Rather, something that happens over here affects something over there. An event can happen in a locality, but it never stays there. Rather, it spreads out to affect the whole. The other name for it is "entanglement." You get the

picture. Within the oneness, relationship. Worded a little differently, from the point of view of Jewish mysticism, within the oneness, there's a flow.

All right, this has been a bit philosophical so far. I can tell by your faces; I'm starting to lose you. Therefore, I'm going to shift gears and will try to suggest why you should care about something as esoteric and philosophical as "within the oneness, relationship." I'm going to try to convince you that this is an underlying theological principle, a bedrock belief, and it affects how we live our lives. It affects our relationships. And it affects our ethics.

I want to give you some examples: I've got four examples here on my page. I'm going to spare you two of them but will not spare you two others. Here are the four:

- The Standing Rock Pipeline in North and South Dakota.
- Wal-Mart.
- Eating meat.
- How we deal with the poor.

The Pastor's Discretionary Fund; **an Hour's Work for Twenty Dollars**

Let me start with the last of these. We have in our church a fund called the Pastor's Discretionary Fund. Many of you have contributed to that fund, and I contribute to it as well. As you know, we live right next door to the Department of Social Services. We have poor people basically coming here to beg on a pretty regular basis. Sometimes, it's a couple a day; sometimes it's just one per day. Sometimes we'll get a week with nobody, but that's pretty rare.

They come, and they are asking for a hand-out. We try to preserve their dignity by giving them an hour's worth of work for twenty dollars. Now here's the deal, though. That hour's worth of work almost never happens. Yes, they go out and do something for an hour, but it's not work. If I were to keep them on as employees, it's no thanks. I give them the twenty dollars; they go their way and do their thing. But it's not a good deal; I'm not getting twenty dollars' worth of work out of it.

What should I do? These are people who in many ways are unemployable. Many of them have been abused. Many of them have mental issues that are rather obvious. Sometimes when I have time, I sit down and talk with them, and I hear their stories. Sometimes I hear a story of incredibly bad decisions they have made in their life that gets them to the point at which they're showing up at a church begging. And so there's a Darwinian side of me that says, this twenty dollars is worth twenty dollars, and you don't deserve it. You are a loser in the Darwinian struggle; you are a loser, so go on your way. Part of me says that in my mind.

The other part of me says that here is a person common to humanity who often has had a pretty rough road so far. Abuse, illness, mental illness. Some have lost all their teeth. They never were taught proper hygiene. There's not a snowball's chance in hell that they're going to get a job anywhere. They need help, and they're trying to get at least twenty bucks.

Believe it or not, the doctrine of the Trinity applies to that. Are we a community or are we just a bunch of competing individuals? And the degree to which we see the interplay

within divinity affects how we treat the lowest and the marginalized among us.

Here's a Hard Example: Wal-Mart Drives Home Prices, Drops Wages

This one's tough. Wal-Mart. Did you know that, when a Wal-Mart comes into your community, home prices in the area of the Wal-Mart go up by an average of 2.0 percent? It's a little more appealing to a home buyer to be near a Wal-Mart. Obesity in that same community goes up by 2.3 percent. Unemployment in that same community goes down by 2.7 percent.

Now here's the tough part: When a Wal-Mart is in your community and you are a regular Wal-Mart shopper, you have the potential of saving by reduced prices on the groceries and the home goods there. You have the potential of saving \$3,100 per person per year if you are a regular Wal-Mart shopper.

So that's pretty appealing, and I know many of you will shop there. We have a membership here at the church. What's harder, though, is that the cost to have a Wal-Mart in your community is \$4,500 per person. That's average, though, and here's where it's hard. Here's where it's darn difficult, and that is that the \$4,500 cost is not borne equally.

I, as an upstanding member of this society, who happens to be a minister married to a teacher, I am not affected by the retail business hardly at all. A Wal-Mart — we have two of them — comes into scenic Binghamton, and my salary didn't change; my wife's salary didn't change at all. Were we to be Wal-Mart shoppers, we would save \$5,000 – 6,000 per year. My cost on it would be actually very simple, just increased taxes, because what happens is that many people in

the retail business lose their jobs; a number of retail stores will go out of business.

The way in which Wal-Mart keeps prices low is by having a low pay scale for their employees, such that many of them qualify for welfare, so they get food stamps, they get welfare that you and I pay for. When you add it up for everybody, it comes to \$4,500 per person, which is the cost, except not to me. The ones who bear the most cost are the employees and the ones who go out of business. They are the ones who bear the brunt of it. As to the people who keep their jobs, their bosses now know that they can get by with paying them less. And so they bear the brunt of it. I, on the other hand, happily go my way and can save several thousand dollars on household items throughout the year.

How Do You Answer That Moral Question? What's the Right Thing?

I suggest to you once again that the doctrine of the Trinity comes to bear on these kinds of questions very intimately. To what degree

should I care about the ones who lose their jobs or the ones who get their wages reduced when it doesn't affect me? Are we a community or are we a Darwinian collection of individuals?

The Trinity says that, within the oneness there is relationship, that we all affect one another, but it's hard. Difficult choices. It's hard to think that way. You don't get those kinds of numbers from a sermon very often. But they're true.

So let me conclude with a great quote. It's in the nature within the oneness relationship. It's from Viktor Frankl. He's the Austrian psychiatrist who wrote *Man's Search for Meaning*. He wrote very simply:

“Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”

Amen.