

LESSONS IN LIVING

Trinity as the Circle of Life

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
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Scripture Readings: Exodus 3:1-14 and 2 Corinthians 13:11-13 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

I'm going to do something kind of dumb today; I'm going to preach on the Trinity. The reason that it's, if not dumb, at least questionable, is that the doctrine of the Trinity didn't really develop in scripture. So when you preach on the gospel, you have to find these pitiful little references like I used in the second reading. Yes, it has three people in it, but that's hardly a developed doctrine. What I'm going to do is look at a very ancient symbol and see what's alive in it. I believe that the great symbols of our faith can be refurbished, but we have to translate them from the world that people lived in when they were spoken, to the world we live in now. I believe they can do that. But I believe that for the church to be viable, we have to be willing to be a lot less comfortable than most churches are. You all know people who have to deny evolution because they're trying to hold on to the same worldview that's described literally in scripture. If you let go of that worldview, you find the symbols speaking and illuminating that world too.

So I'm going to do the best I can do, after about 30 years of reading theological books on the Trinity, to save you a lot of time (Laughter). I wish I had those years back. (Loud laughter) Some of the most inert and useless reasoning you'll ever find are on this particular subject, but my role is to do the best I can to kind of give a living presentation – *A* living presentation, not *THE* living presentation. So the point is never to just agree with me but to go within your own process and see how you can come up with a living statement of faith, because you have a calling that is equally as important as mine. This conversation about who a human being is in the world – the task of theology – is the most important thing any of us can do. You may not talk about God; you may not talk about religion, but discussing who a human being is in the world, what is our relationship to nature and to life?, how do our lives make sense?, is some of the most important work any of us can do. So as I'm saying what I'm saying, doing the best I can, your role is very simple: you're to ask one question: *So what?* Now you can't leave it there; you have to do some work too. I'm not asking for hecklers, (Loud laughter) but I'm saying that is the most important question in theology: *So what?*

Now, the Trinity is a broken symbol for most people. It's like a compass that doesn't point at anything in particular, and the idea is you're supposed to believe in *that*. The purpose of this series is to look at what spiritual sanity would be and what spiritual insanity is. The principles we're looking at in these five sermons, we're coming to the end of the whole section about the God part, Creation, Relationships, Ethics, the principal of sanity, and Integrity, is that religion should call you to your full capacity and integrate different parts of your being; it should hold you together. The one we're going to talk about today is that religion should illumine your life, and here's the key: it shouldn't be the thing that needs illumination. Most theology is like a flashlight that doesn't work anymore. And you come to church, and they give you candles so you can see that the flashlight is still there, and believe in the flashlight. That's not the purpose of a symbol. If a symbol doesn't take you deeper into your life, it's broken. That doesn't mean it can't be fixed, but we have to do the work of animating it, and one of the saddest things I see in

most sermons is it's almost like CPR; you have a sense that they're trying to resuscitate a corpse. Live, darn you, live! Religion should explicate, illuminate, and enlighten your life. If it's not doing that, then something needs to change.

The church has gotten really good at not really being accountable on these kinds of things. There's a story, talking about the Trinity, of Augustan, and he was on a beach thinking about the Trinity, as we all do (loud laughter) when we're at the beach. And according to the story, a beautiful child came up and started dipping a cup into the ocean and emptying it, dipping a cup into the ocean and emptying it. And Augustan said, "What are you doing?" And the child said, "I'm trying to empty the ocean." And he said, "You can't empty the ocean with that little cup, it's infinite." And the child said, "You cannot grasp God with your little mind, because God is infinite." That puts you in your place, doesn't it? (Laughter) And that's about the best the church usually does, right? It distracts you from your question; it doesn't answer the question. You could use that same device on any theological assertion ever made anywhere in the world: It's a mystery; you can't comprehend it, just trust, just believe the preacher. Bad mistake. If we're going to have a reverence for life, that means we have to realize that human religion is a joke. If you're really going to respect reality and the sacred, then you have to look at what human beings have tried to do to capture the mystery as something kind of funny. That's not disrespectful of what the symbol stands for.

Remember Monty Python's difference between blasphemy and heresy? Blasphemy is where you're laughing at the sacred. Heresy is where you're laughing at the church. You have a responsibility to laugh at the church because we're human beings, its humility. So I want to start with a joke. I actually went online to see if there is a joke about the Trinity. (Laughter). So the Holy Trinity decides to go on a vacation. (And remember we're talking about human symbols here, not what they refer to.) The Holy Trinity decides to go on vacation, and the Holy Spirit says to the other two, "Let's go to California," and God says, "Nah, they're too liberal out there. They're going to use all that politically correct stuff... they're going to call me a mother or something... Let's go someplace else, let's go to Jerusalem! That's my favorite town." And Jesus says, "Dad?! Have you forgotten what happened to me there? (Laughter) That's very insensitive." (Loud laughter) So then Jesus says, "I got an idea. Let's go to a Presbyterian church!" (Laughter) And the Holy Spirit says, "That's a great idea! I've never been in one of those!" (Loud extended laughter and clapping)

Okay, now we're ready to think about the sacred, right? Because we realize that human attempts to grasp it, to control it, to define it, are the joke. The sacred is not the joke, but to really have reverence for the sacred, we have to laugh at our human efforts to corral it all. It's like a mosquito on an elephant, trying to understand the elephant. If the mosquito wrote a creed (and I think I have one of those brains that can grasp the inner workings of a mosquito brain (laughter); see, small brains work alike) wouldn't the mosquito say it's all knowing? I mean, it's got to know more than the mosquito knows. It's all-powerful; it's going to go wherever it wants to go. This creed would not really tell the mosquito that much about the elephant itself, but it would be enormously helpful in trusting the life situation that this little critter found itself in. Trust it. Trust it. It's your home. You're not going to improve it; you're not going to jump off of it... the mosquito can jump off the elephant; you can't jump off of this, at least not in any way we want to talk about today.

What these symbols do is take us deeper in our experiences and help us make links that our reason can't do, and our senses can't do – that doesn't mean they're not there. If you take a prism and reflect light, it breaks into spectrum. I'm thinking three primary colors; do we have any people who work in optics? (No response from congregation.) Good, it's three. (Laughter) Those three primary colors are how a human being experiences something that's a continuum; it's *not* broken into those exact colors, and they're not

really separate. We experience them as separate, but they're not; they're one continuous something that we cannot see. So what the symbol does is help us trust in between those. Now with the prisms, that's not a big deal, but in time, it's an enormous deal because when we look at where we're coming from, it looks invisible to us; it looks like nothingness. That can be terrifying: Am I lost? Have I just been thrown into the world? Am I an accident? As I look at my own life, and I'm trying to get through it, I don't see a net underneath me. How is it possible to say that the universe even knows I am here? That's a very terrifying question for many people. And then, certainly, when we look at the tail end of the story, and realize we're going back to something, that also looks like nothingness to us. So what the ancients did was build little links between those missing places, and they put a human face on those links. Now that doesn't mean they're invisible people making all of this happen. What it means is: you have a personal tie to it. It's that intimate; it's that personal.

I was talking with somebody a few weeks back that had a terrible tragedy happen in their life. Nothing helped. There were no words that could be said. It was bigger than that and more painful than that. But what they said was they gardened, and getting close to the earth gave them a personal tie to the depth. See, it can be personal without being a person, and every person here has, at some point or another I would hope, had some experience of nature that was so intimate that you felt yourself a child of that. It may be an animal, it may just be a beautiful sunrise/sunset, it may be water, but there can be something deeply intimate about your ties to life and to the earth.

So the first face that's put on there is called the parent. This tells you that the source out of which you come, which looks like nothingness, is something. If something comes from nothing, that's a very strange universe, and yet that's what it looks like. And if you don't believe in God, you still have that mystery that you have to deal with: How does something come from what looks like nothing? Very, very, strange.

It's like the song, "The Circle of Life," from the "Lion King." To talk about the Trinity, you have to get really complicated, and I'm not going to be able to do that because it's a sermon and you have better things to do. But what I'm trying to say is as you study the philosophy of it, it gets very intricate, but it's no more complicated than that song: there's a circle of life, and it moves us all. And whatever's happening to us, we're somewhere in that circle. That sense that we're not lost, that we're not alone, is, I believe, part of what the Trinity was intended to symbolize. Where that makes a difference – the *So what* – is that when you look at that nothingness out of which you come, you don't need to be terrified. You must be a product of it; you must be a child of that. And if you come from that nothingness, when you look at the other end of the story, somehow, it must receive you. That, what looks like nothingness to you, must be your cradle, and it must be your ultimate home. So that means that all the paths in between those, you can live joyfully and in trust. It doesn't mean things will happen the way you want them to happen; it doesn't mean life is going to be fair; it doesn't mean life is going to be as long as you want it to be; but it can be a song for you. It can be that. So the first part of the Trinity, if you look at these ancient symbols, is talking about the source, and calling it a parent; that gives us birth the way our parents do. If human beings do not return to that kind of sense of intimacy, to our origins, we'll never be able to do the ecological piece. If the earth is not our father and mother, whatever you want to call it; if the universe is not our parent, we won't have the reverence to make the sacrifices we're going to need to make to not poison ourselves. So this work of cosmology – of finding who we are in the universe – is the architecture that is missing. People cannot have a good political framework if they don't know who they are in the universe. That's the first step.

The second step is when the life comes into being. And for many cultures, that's what the Spirit did. That's not the way it developed for us, but you still see some of that in the symbol called *quickenings*. It came from the situation that a mother has in her stomach when, all of a sudden, something starts moving –

that was called *quicken*ing. When it says in the Apostles Creed, Jesus will judge the quick and the dead, it's not talking about gunfighters. (Laughter) That's what I thought when I was a kid. The symbol of breath and the symbol of spirit are the same in the ancient languages. You had two words for it. One was *breath*, and the other was the *circulation of your blood*. So it's realizing that living and dying are not two separate things; that they're linked in some intimate way – that what is living comes from what you call dead, and what you call dead has got to have the living within it, as a potential. So somehow what we call dead matter is pregnant with life. And then life is pregnant with human consciousness. It moves toward that, but human beings are the only ones who seem to do it in aces. So, in the ancient world, the way they talked about that and put a face on it -- human consciousness – was to call it *the only Child of God*. That was human consciousness, not this one particular baby born in Bethlehem, in this particular stall. That particular baby revealed that, but it revealed that for all of us.

Here's the hard part, the part that's missing in most of our work on the Trinity, is you must go back again. Everything that's here has got to go back in the box at the end of the day. In some religions they talk about Creator, Sustainer, and Destroyer. But that's not going to work, because it's just too negative. But think about it: do you know anybody that's lived a thousand years? Do you know anybody that's lived two hundred years? So you have to make peace with the whole journey, the whole circle that's there, and realize that that is just as beautiful, and just as much a part of who you are as being born and being sustained through life.

Let's return to our question: *So what?* If the Trinity is a hypothetical assertion about the inner workings of God, or what the lodgings are – Jesus lives in this room, God lives in this room, a ghost lives in this room – very strange – then there probably isn't a lot to save from it. But if, by Trinity, you're talking about the circle of life, if you're talking about where we come from and where we go; if that symbol is painting a face so that we can sense the intimate connections to our source, to what unites us in life, to what receives us in death; if the symbol is doing that, then I think it's doing the most important work that is humanly possible. As I say, we can make the Trinity as complicated as we want to, and that's what the church has done, maybe not on purpose but it just happened. Maybe that's what I did today, but here's what it boils down to in your heart, and I think it's said beautifully in the song--

*It's the Circle of Life
And it moves us all
Through despair and hope
Through faith and love
Till we find our place
On the path unwinding
In the Circle
The Circle of Life*

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.



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