

ST. STEPHEN'S EAST DELTA UNITED CJURCH  
May 30<sup>th</sup>, 2010, Trinity Sunday

The Reverend Doug Graves

### THE ROUGH EDGES OF MONOTHEISM

Readings – Genesis 1:1-4, Psalm 8 and Romans 5:1-5

It's Trinity Sunday and I have a question: *"What difference does the Trinity really make?"*

I don't mean what difference does it make in arcane theological discussions tweedy professors have at divinity schools. I don't mean what difference does it make in ancient creeds or in Ph.D. dissertations on the Christology of the anti- Nicene Fathers. I mean, what difference does believing in the Trinity really make at work, in your apartment, at school, in the down-to-earth lives you and I live?

I know what you're thinking. It's an overcast late spring Sunday, you're saying to yourself. We're here for a little spiritual nourishment before going home to watch some World Cup Soccer, or golf, or one of those great war movies that the Turner Classic Movie Channel is showing this weekend, and Graves is actually going to preach about the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

It's true, but if it helps, I'm not doing it simply because it's Trinity Sunday.. I'm preaching Trinity because I've come to believe that the ancient Christian doctrine of the Trinity is one of those doctrines that really matters.

It matters because it makes a huge difference in how we think about God. And more even importantly, it makes really big difference in what we think matters in life.

So put on your thinking caps as my third grade teacher, Mrs. McLennan, used to say, we're gonna talk Trinity!

And don't worry; I'm not going to even try to say close to everything, just one thing on this lazy Sunday.... just one really important thing...

(1)Let me start with a rough-edged truth about believing in God. A lot of good God believing monotheists - past and present - have done and still do really bad things.

And here's the rougher edge – they often they do bad things not in spite of what they believe about God, they do them because of what they believe.

The recent spate of best-selling anti-God books, from Richard Dawkins to Christopher Hitchens, has well-chronicled the story of religious people behaving horribly. These critics do manage to leave out the even grimmer stories of atheists behaving even more horribly; Hitler and Stalin do not get mentioned, for instance. But there is no denying the bad religion story – the Crusades,

the Spanish Inquisition, more recently Northern Ireland, the Middle East, the Balkans, and now Islamic terrorism – evil in some part actually inspired by believing in God.

The issues that drive these conflicts have often been more cultural, ethnic, or political than theological. But whatever the deep motivations, the rough-edged fact is that God has been used as an excuse to do horrible things.

I promised that there would be only one thing, just one thing, about why the Trinity matters. Here it is: the Trinity matters because it is a way of imagining God that powerfully discourages the doing of horrible things to other human beings. Understood rightly, the idea of Trinity encourages people to do kind things to other people.

Here's why. Christians are monotheists of course; we believe in one God. But the problem is that a monotheistic picture of God can imagine God as a radically disconnected divinity, God locked in self-contained, austere, insulated singularity.

An example: One of the great science fiction films of all times was Stanley Kubrick's 1968 classic, *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The film, you may recall, includes several scenes in which "God" makes a cinematic appearance. Kubrick's symbol for God in the movie is this great stone monolith. God as a hunk of cold rock. It's a brilliant film, but as a Trinitarian Christian I find this picture of the Divine really worrisome.

Here's my problem. It pictures the capital "H" Heart of the Universe, the very Center of Meaning, as a cold piece of lone rock. And one rocks don't have relationships. Rocks don't care. Rocks have no passion. Rocks don't love. This is a God of icily singular, utterly transcendent, vastly distant, disconnected Divinity.

Another example. In Aldous Huxley's novel, *Those Barren Leaves*, a character named Miss Thriplow finds herself bored and is suddenly taken with the idea that she really ought to become more "*serious and spiritual*." She takes to her bed and tries to imagine God. Huxley writes this, "*...lying on her back, with all her muscles relaxed, she began to think about God...*

*God is a spirit, she said to herself. She tried to picture something huge and empty, but alive. A huge flat expanse of sand, for example, and over it a huge blank dome of sky; and above the sand, everything should be tremulous and shimmering with heat - emptiness that was yet alive."*

Sometimes monotheistic religion has imagined a God who does relate to humanity, but the God they picture is a judgmental tyrant of pure moral absolutes; a God who relates to the world by demanding nothing but a similar purity, radical obedience to law, even a hatred of the world and a hatred of all who do not subscribe to such a God.

There are lots of problems with such pictures of God, but here's the big one: it's not hard to imagine people using such a deity to do the horrible things people are inclined to do. Belief in a God of distance, austerity and judgment might even encourage people to do horrid things to

each other. Why? Because if God is all that matters, and if this God is beyond loving, if this God is beyond relationship, if God cares only for austere purity, what do people matter?

(2) So how does the doctrine of the Trinity make a difference? Trinity pictures one God, but imagines God in a radically different way. Trinity does not imagine a God of insularity and isolation, rather the Trinity imagines a God whose oneness is actually community and relationship – that’s the “three in one” business.

The story of God summarized in Trinity draws an image of God radically different from the God of distance and austerity. This God is no vague spirit, no mere moral judge, no rock, no desert.

The God we meet in the Bible is God who passionately and tirelessly longs for humanity. This God actually pursues relationship. God the Creator – God the Father - enters history to speak to Israel in the drama of the Old Testament. God the Redeemer- God the Son reaches out to us in Jesus Christ, a human person like us. God the life force – God the Spirit - is present with us in our day to day lives. This is a God whose every act is not divine distancing, but an outward extension of the Divine Self, a reaching out of the Divine Being toward humanity in love.

Not only does this God love, but here’s where this Trinity business gets really major - this God actually is love. God as Trinity is - in God's very "self," by God's very "nature" - loving relationship.

For me, this, this is the most transforming affirmation imbedded in the ancient doctrine of the Trinity - the towering truth that is the heart of it all, the ultimate reality of the universe, the *Mysterium Tremendum*, is a God who is love, a God who is relationship, a God who is communion.

Just think of what this implies! It means that the great truth is a relationship of intense love and profound communion. Trinity insists that God is not just Pure Being, that God is no block of stone adrift in outer space, that God is no empty desert, God is not an impossibly demanding law-giver.

Trinity insists that God is nothing less than love itself.  
God is communion.  
God is relationship.  
God is passion.

The passage that Dianne read so beautifully from the Book of Romans is one of the many in the Bible where God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit are spoken of in one breath. And where does Paul end but with these words?

*“God’s love,”* he says, *“has been poured into our hearts...”* No monolith this God, no desert this God, no moral tyrant; this is God whose “love has been poured into our hearts.

Let me end by throwing down the gauntlet. If the deepest truth about God is that God is love, if the deepest truth is that God is relationship, communion, intimacy, it means nothing less than this:

- Everything that promotes, nourishes, deepens and sustains relationships of love, trust, communion and intimacy is God-like.
- Everything that severs kills, demeans, trivializes and hampers relationships of love is actually un-Godly.

In a word, here's the one thing I promised you this Trinity Sunday: God as Trinity means that everything we do, everything, what we say to a stranger at the Grocery Store, the non-perishable good we bring for First United Church, the way we speak to a harried waitress, the checks we write, the words we utter, the choices we make at the office, whom we love, how we love, all of it is called to reflect the perfect communion of love that is the very nature of God.

Trinity means that the heart of it all,  
the first word and the last word,  
the ultimate reality,  
is nothing less than burning love.

Thanks be to God. Amen.