

“God for Us”
Romans 5:1-5; Deuteronomy 6:4-9
Trinity Sunday/May 30, 2010/FPC
By Rev. Dr. Glenn Hink

I. Texts: Read Deut. 6:4-9 and Romans 5:1-5

II. Introduction

I was amazed to be standing in the dugout of the San Francisco Giants professional baseball team. The year was 1969, and during spring break our family took a trip down the Pacific Coast. When we got to San Francisco the Giants had some preseason, home games. I suspect that my parents had been in contact with the Giants’ “PR” department, so when we got to the Candlestick Park we went straight from the PR offices, to the clubhouse, and then to the dugout.

I was a baseball card collector, so I had a number of San Francisco Giants on cards. It was exciting to see the players up close who I only knew on cards; Ron Hunt, Chris Spier, Dick Dietz, Willie McCovey and Juan Marichal. They were glad to sign a baseball I brought with me (and still have). But I was waiting for one player; Willie Mays. I had a number of Willie Mays baseball cards, and memorized his hitting statistics. I had watched him play on television. I had read about him in magazines and books. Willie Mays hit homeruns and hit for a high average. He was fast and stole bases. He was a great centerfielder with a strong arm. Willie Mays was great at everything on the baseball field....perhaps one of the most complete players ever. In the spring of 1969 he was in the twilight of his 22 year career. He would retire in 1973.

But in the spring of 1969 there I was in the Giants’ dugout looking for Willie Mays....hoping that we would be playing that day. And then he came out into the dugout. I recognized him from his baseball cards. My dad said, “Go and ask him to autograph your ball.” But so you know what? I couldn’t move. I couldn’t say a thing. I froze. Knowing what was happening, and seeing Willie Mays getting ready to go out on the field, my dad took my baseball and asked Willie Mays to sign it. Willie Mays stopped, grunted something I couldn’t hear, signed the ball, tossed it to me.....and went out on the field. Thankfully I didn’t drop the ball.

That was my experience with Willie Mays; about 15 seconds in the San Francisco Giants dugout in 1969. But here’s the thing; those 15 seconds changed everything. I had a brief experience with the real Willie Mays, so all the baseball cards, games on television, magazine articles, and statistics I memorized became less important. The real experience, and the signed baseball, became most important. It was my 15 seconds with the real Willie Mays.

I think that real experiences work like that often. We can watch and hear a rollercoaster from the ground. But riding in the front seat when it does a loop is a more significant experience. We can watch the Master's Golf Tournament at Augusta on television. But being there, smelling the grass and walking the course.....that's a different experience. And we can read about love and romance. There's lots of books about the science and psychology of love. But taking the risk to fall in love.....to give and receive love....that's a different experience. Real experiences in our lives matter.....and they are different than reading, studying, thinking, and watching. Real experiences significantly change our lives in ways that just reading about someone or hearing about something never can.

III. Theological Reflection

Today is Trinity Sunday. I first did some serious reading, thinking and studying about the Trinity in seminary. The Trinity is the distinctly Christian theological doctrine that there is one God in three separate, but connect persons. In seminary we studied the arguments and councils of the 4th and 5th century Christian theologians. It was then that the doctrine of the Trinity, the mystery about the nature of God, was "hammered out" with theological precision. There were intense arguments about the difference between "substance, person, and being." And for 1500 years the Christian Church has affirmed the deep thinking and work of those 4th and 5th century church councils. Today we'll repeat the 4th C Nicene Creed, and all eleven of the confessions in our Presbyterian Church (USA) Book of Confessions affirm the Trinity. The reading, studying, thinking, writing and arguing was important work.

But that isn't how thinking and confessing God as Trinity began. It began in something deeper. It began in something more real. It began in the early Christians' significant experience with God. The origins of the Trinity are not found in the dusty books of the academy. Rather the Trinity is grounded in the real experience of the first followers of Jesus.....15 seconds in the dugout.

The first followers of Jesus were Jewish. They came from the faith traditions of ancient Israel. They were strict monotheists; there is only one God. The Romans, Greeks and other pagans around them believed that heaven and earth were filled with numerous gods....but not the Jews. They believed in one God, who created all and sustains all, who chose Israel for special service, and who demanded complete faithfulness. The "Shema" from Deuteronomy 6 was memorized by every Jew: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord only. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." (Deut. 6:4-5) There is one God, who loves, and who wants from us faithfulness and trust grounded in love.

And yet those early Jewish Christians also experience something special in Jesus. In his teaching, miracles, healings, sermons and love they experienced the presence of God. At the cross they came to an experience of love and service for their salvation, and in the risen Christ they experienced God's promise of victory over sin and death. And the early church was drawn together, somehow, by the real presence of Christ in their midst. They were compelled to confess Jesus as their Lord and God.....to believe that somehow God was uniquely present in Jesus Christ. Those early Christians who repeated time after time "The Lord is our God, the Lord only," now spoke of Jesus as God. And so has been the experience and confession of Christians since then.

And those early Christians also knew the experience of the Holy Spirit. They knew from the Old Testament prophets that the Spirit is the power and presence of God that would come in the end of days when God's kingdom was to break forth in creation. Following that first Pentecost they were empowered in surprising and remarkable ways. They fearlessly told the stories of Jesus Christ, broke through barriers of race, culture and status, and continued the ministry of Jesus Christ with miracles, healings, teaching and preaching.....so that the kingdom of God was breaking out all around them. They knew it wasn't about their power, plans and hopes. It was the power and grace of God's presence.....it was the Holy Spirit.....it was and continues to be remarkable.

That's the Trinity. Out of those early Christians' experiences they came to know and share a revelation about God; "God is one," they said. "And also we have experienced Jesus Christ as God and the Holy Spirit as God. We don't know how it all fits together. But that's what we experience." And it's what we continue to experience. When we share about our experiences with God we bear witness to the revelation of God as one, and God as three; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The study, argument and thinking about the Trinity is important. But it is never more important than the Christian community's reflections on our experiences with God.....saying together who we experience God to be.

As Paul writes to the Christians in Rome in 56 CE we see some of the very early Christian experience and reflection on the Trinity. This was 275 years before the Nicene Creed was finalized, and 350 years before Augustine did deep theological writing about the Trinity. As Paul addresses the topic of salvation in these brief 5 verses, we hear mention of the Trinity in a very early and unformulated way ("God, our Lord Jesus Christ, and they Holy Spirit"). And what's more, we see who these early Christians experienced the triune God to be.

God the Father is the creator and sustainer of all. God the Father spans the 14.7 billion years of the universe's existence and beyond, knows the billions of planets, and most amazingly, knows and loves each of us. God the Father desires to be in relationship with each of us, and acts for us so that we might believe, trust and love God the Father. All things are to bring glory and honor to the holy God, and God directs all things to God's appointed ends. God the Father is faithful to us, and for us.

God the Son, Jesus Christ, is God's salvation for us. God acts in Jesus Christ to put us in a right relationship with God through faith. In Jesus Christ God the Son shows us how to live as God's children, loving God and our neighbors. In Jesus Christ God has defeated sin and death, so that we look through death to a resurrection like Jesus' resurrection. In Jesus Christ God the Son has brought the beginning of God's final kingdom and reign. "For God so loved the world God sent his only Son," we read in John 3:16. God the Son is God for us.

God the Holy Spirit is the power and presence of God with us. God the Holy Spirit transforms each of our lives, and our life together. God the Holy Spirit empowers us to continue the ministry of Jesus Christ, and as we do that we bear witness to the end time kingdom of God. Through the Holy Spirit, as Paul says, "God's love has been poured into our hearts" (Rom. 5:5), we are united with Christ, and we live through difficulties and sufferings with courage and hope. God the Holy Spirit is God's grace and power for us.

Dr. James Mays was an intimidating force at seminary when I was there. He was internationally known and well respected as an Old Testament theologian. He was in his late 60's when I took his required prophets class. His lectures were "tight" and deep. There was no "fluff." In his seminars he expected preparation, and "did not suffer fools gladly." When he asked about the meaning of Hebrew words...you had better be ready to answer. I learned a lot from Dr. James Mays, and respected him greatly as a professor, but would never have called him a friend.

However, as I was finishing up seminary, and was interviewing with churches for pastor positions, I had an interesting experience. I got a call from the senior pastor of a large Presbyterian Church in Columbia, SC. He asked if I was interested in interviewing with them for an associate pastor position. I said, "Sure," and then asked how he came to call me. The senior pastor said he had talked to his friend Jim Mays, and asked who to interview at the seminary. He said "Jim" had given him my name.

As I thought about that I realized that Dr. James Mays was still intimidating...still an international respected scholar...and still not someone to "chit-chat" with.....but Dr. James Mays went out of his way for me.....thought enough of me to recommend

me....wanted to help me. Dr. James Mays was a friend to this senior pastor and friend to me. Dr James Mays was for me.

God is still the holy Other. God was before time and creation, and will be after all things. God is due worship. I don't think we'll stand before the glory of God and "chit-chat." But know this:

God the Father is for us. God the Son is for us. God the Holy Spirit is for us. God is for us.

IV. Conclusion

Three in one.....one in three.....the Trinity is a mystery. It's a little like ice, water, steam...but not exactly. And I'm a son, a husband, and a father...one person and three different relationships.....the Trinity is a little like that, but not exactly. Those examples give us some understanding, but also fall short. The Trinity remains somewhat of a mystery. But it is also the witness of people and their experience with God for 2000 years.

The symbol of the Christian Church has been the cross. The cross speaks of the love of God for us in Jesus Christ. But even more than the cross, the Trinity is a uniquely Christian doctrine. It speaks particularly about how the transcendent God of creation is with us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and continues to abide with us in the Holy Spirit. The Trinity expresses in deeper, fuller way, God for us.