

A Sermon for Trinity Sunday, Year A
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Returning Our Faith to Its Basics

Two thousand years ago, when Christianity was “the new kid on the block,” it was a much simpler religion. And the main issues that Christians had to deal with were as follows: First, they wanted to keep their worship of God pure and simple. This was not always easy to do, because they lived in a culture of pagan polytheism. But they were successful in doing so, but at the cost of having the rest of society look upon them as strange people.

Second, they wanted to pass their faith on to the next generation of believers. This was hard to do as well, because, for nearly three hundred years, Christians were the subjects of persecution. But they were successful in transmitting their faith, well, and the church enjoyed rapid growth in almost every place where a congregation was planted.

And, finally, they wanted to make sure that they took care of “widows and orphans,” and anyone else in need. The fact that so much of the correspondence among Christians dealt with the pressing issue of taking care of the needy, and the fact that Christians were generally known as people who took care of the needy, shows us that they were successful in this as well.

Christianity was a much simpler religion back then. But not just because it was still in its infancy, but also because Christians were driven, quite literally, underground. The persecution of Christians forced them to meet in secret; often in the homes of their members, but also in the caves and underground and catacombs where they buried their dead.

Over time, rumors were purposely spread that, in their secret gatherings, where they worshiped and shared Holy Communion, Christians were engaging in sexual orgies and cannibalism. And because they refused to worship in the Greco-Roman pantheon of gods, they were also considered to be atheists. Christianity was such a strange religion in those early days, that its followers were called the “third race,” and even “haters of mankind.”

But what a difference a couple of hundred years makes! By the fifth century, after the practice of Christianity had been legalized, Christians were finally accepted by the rest of society. And because they weren't hiding or running for their lives, they could take the time, and make the effort, to explain, in great detail, the tenets of their faith. Christianity was finally becoming mainline, its theology was becoming more complex, and Jesus, the Eucharist, and the Cross were being written about by the brightest and best scholars.

One of the best theologians and scholars was a man named Athanasius. Today, he is best remembered for what he wrote about the Trinity. Here is a bit of what Athanasius had to say:

“... We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; neither confounding the Persons nor dividing the Substance. For there is one

Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost.
But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost is all
one, the Glory equal, the Majesty co-eternal. Such as the Father is, such is
the Son, and such is the Holy Ghost ...”

This is only a small part of what is known as the Creed of St. Athanasius, and, if you wish, you may read it in its entirety on page 864 in the Book of Common Prayer.

Looking back, it's fairly easy to see that a shift was taking place within Christianity. As it moved out of the catacombs and into the cathedrals, it also moved from being a fairly simple religion to be one that was quite complex. It was a movement, described by one scholar, “from the narthex to the nave, from the pew to the pulpit, and from simple frescoes adorning the walls of caves to gilded and jeweled crucifixes that were paraded down marbled aisles into opulent sanctuaries.”

So, what does all of this have to do with Trinity Sunday? I mention it because I believe that Trinity Sunday is one of the few feast days on the Church calendar that calls us to return to the basics. Today, in the twenty-first century, the Christian Church is anything but simple. Even the Episcopal Church – our beloved, little corner of Christendom – is one of many denominations that are in conflict within themselves. And over the past forty years, the issues that seemed to drive the Episcopal Church were the ordination of women, the development of a new prayer book, and whether our church would be inclusive or exclusive. And there have been no easy answers, and there have been brilliant scholars and theologians on both sides of every issue, and some congregations have literally split apart because they couldn't resolve their disagreements. And while these issues *are* important, and touch the lives of *many* people, I have to wonder if they are as important as the issues that drove the early church, and if, in devoting so much attention and energy to them, if we are neglecting the greater issues of worship, evangelism, and outreach.

We need to be reminded regularly, that our faith began when unsophisticated people met a simple man named Jesus, and the encounter changed their lives forever. This day reminds us that the *explanation* of our faith was preceded by the *experience* of our faith. I believe that the real litmus test of how faithful we have been to our calling, will not be in how well we argued our positions, but in how well we allowed the Christian faith to be life-giving and life-changing.

When John the Baptist heard about Jesus, and the things that he was doing, he some of his followers to ask Jesus: “Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?” And Jesus' told John's followers: “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them.”

Every week, someone new will walk into a church and wonder, “Is this the place I have been looking for? Is this the place that I need to be? Or, should I try another place?” And the Feast Day of the Trinity reminds us that, just as it was with the exchange between John and

Jesus, so it should be with us. For people who search should be able to find, in any Christian church, not a place that is divided over the peripheral issues, but a place that worships God with simplicity and purity, a place that helps other to learn about and embrace this God we worship, and a place that looks after the needy. That's how it was in the first century. And that's how it should be today. Amen.