

Genesis 1:1-2:3

**Trinity Sunday
2 Cor. 13:11-13
St. Mary the Virgin
June 11, 2017**

Mt. 28:16-20

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“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.”¹ Amen.

At the end of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, we hear this simple yet all-embracing statement of our Christian faith. It invites us into intimate relationship with God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, bonded by love, grace, and communion. It also puts us in touch with the very early years of the church.

At the end of Matthew’s gospel, we hear a similar statement as Jesus says farewell and commissions the disciples to go forth, teach, and baptize across the face of the earth, in the name the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These two statements capture the essence and threefold heart of our faith. They were easy to remember, commonly used for baptism in the early church,² and provided starting points for teaching what Christianity meant about the fullness of divinity.

It would take a few more centuries for the church councils to formalize a doctrine of the Trinity, in response to missionary and other needs of an expanding church that was heavily influenced by a wide range of philosophies and theologies, and which threatened to fracture Christianity in a range of conflicting directions.³ At some point, it became essential to ask what did Christianity believe--what did it stand for? Yet as a scholar, I’m aware of how easily academia can complexify something very simple. As Anglican theologian Owen Thomas reminds us, “no particular words are essential to the Trinitarian doctrine.”⁴ Father, Son, and Holy Spirit can also be said as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Pope Francis makes this point with his Twitter greeting this morning: “The Feast of the Most Holy Trinity invites us to be a leaven of communion, consolation, and mercy.”⁵ Expressed symbolically through the sign of the cross, it becomes a way of transcending the nuances of words.

At the end of the gospel, Jesus’ commission to “make disciples of all nations,”⁶ all peoples, transforms them to become Christ’s agents in the world. We too, as inheritors of that discipleship, are called to be Christ’s agents in the world. For us, as for the disciples, Jesus commission was grounded in three key aspects: authority, obedience, and relationship.

¹ 2Cor.13:13

² J Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel and Jürgen Moltman, *Humanity in God*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1983, p.82.

³ J.P. Mackey, “Trinity, Doctrine of the” in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, Alan Richardson and John Bowden eds., pp. 581-9. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983, pp.582-86.

⁴ Owen C. Thomas, *Introduction to Theology*. Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow Co., 1983, p.72.

⁵ @Pontifex, June 11, 2017.

⁶ Mt.28:19.

Just as Jesus said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”⁷ They were to act on his authority, and teach others “to obey everything” that he had commanded them. Lest they stray, they were to remember that he would be with them always.

Authority, obedience, and relationship. What exactly do these three words mean, and how are we to embrace them? They may evoke a sense of uneasiness in most, if not all of us, certainly if we remember being an adolescent—either our own adolescence or our children’s—or if we have been in situations of domination and subordination that were based on injustice, fear, or abuse.

During the 1980s, in recognizing my call to ordination, I struggled with the notion of submitting myself to the authority of the church, and the vow to obey my bishop. What if the church or a bishop someday might order me to do something I believed was unjust or wrong? The call to relationship meant radical relationship with all—not just those with whom I felt comfortable or agreed. Was I really up to this commitment? A priest friend and mentor, when hearing my reasons why I should not be ordained, responded saying, “Yes, I went in kicking and screaming too.”

As I pondered his words, I began to understand authority in a deeper, biblical way. Authority comes from the Latin word for author, the root of which means one who grows or increases.⁸ In the beautiful, poetic creation story we heard this morning, we sense God’s creative impulse—to increase creation—and also a sense of intimacy, perhaps love, with all that was created, calling it “good,” “very good.” In giving humanity dominion over the earth, God imparts free will, which delegates divine authority to care for creation, including to care for one another, in order for all to flourish. So, too, the authority given to Christ is intended to grow or increase our love for one another and to reconcile all in unity with God. Paul too claimed that the authority given to him was for “building up and not for tearing down.”⁹ Authority that comes from God, commissioned through Christ, and informed by the Holy Spirit is not abusive, nor does it serve oneself at the expense of others.

Just as authority, is at root creative and constructive, so too I came to understand obedience as more than “do what one is told.” Although Jesus told the disciples to teach others to obey “everything that I have commanded you,”¹⁰ the word “obey,” as used in this morning’s gospel, also can be translated from the Greek to mean “observe.”¹¹ Roman Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen, in preaching on obedience, drew on the Latin roots of the word “obey,” *Ob- audire*, to mean to listen closely,¹² presumably to hear, ponder, and understand the wisdom of what was being said. That wisdom would guide one’s actions to follow it. This is how I understand Jesus statement to teach others to obey all that he had commanded and taught. When we really understand the meaning and wisdom, we want to do so, from our heart. Paul urged the Corinthians to “put things in order” and listen to his appeal,¹³ in other words to obey the

⁷ Mt.28:17.

⁸ *Auctor, augēre*. Walter W. Skeat, *A Concise Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*. New York: Perigee Books, Putnam and Sons, 1980, p. 32.

⁹ 2 Cor. 13:10.

¹⁰ Mt.28:20.

¹¹ Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy, eds. *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Study Hardback edition. London: Geoffrey Chapman 1995, cited in Chris Haslam, “Clippings: Trinity Sunday – June 15, 2014,” <http://montreal.anglican.org/comments/archive/atrinl.shtml>.

¹² *Ob- audire*, near, close by and to hear. See various etymological sources including *Webster’s Revised Unabridged Dictionary (1913)*, <http://www.dict.org/bin/Dict>, <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/obey?s=t>. Homily preached at daily Eucharist service, Harvard Divinity School, during Nouwen’s tenure, 1983-87.

¹³ 2Cor.13:11.

holy wisdom that he was trying to impart. To do so would build divine relationship: “and the God of love and peace will be with you” (v.11).

When we are convinced that authority is just and grounded in universal love or regard, it is relatively easy to obey, even if it might not be our preferred course of action. But if that authority seeks to oppress and abuse, then we need to discern how God’s authority may calling us to respond. This grounded the deeply spiritual aspect of the Civil Rights struggle. It also has empowered many who have stood against other forms of injustice, including those that we face today.

Authority is about growing and increasing God’s love and respect for all creation. Obedience is about listening and discerning wisdom, and then heeding that wisdom; and where wisdom is not to be found, discerning toward what the Holy Spirit is calling us. When we heed these, we are drawn into reconciling relationships--with God, with one another, and with all creation, sustained through God’s love.

“Life can survive only because of the generosity of other lives,” Pope Francis said recently.¹⁴ This speaks not only to the love of God and the grace of Christ, but also to the relationship we are to have with one another, and with creation. One of the Anglican women I met this spring at the UN Commission on the Status of Women, was from Peshawar, Pakistan. An ophthalmologist, she had become deeply involved in interfaith relationship-building. It is in the federally administrated tribal areas, and the site of violence and unrest. Christians are a tiny part of the population. In 2013 her church was bombed; 127 people were killed, and 250 were injured, in the country’s deadliest attack against Christians.¹⁵ She talked about how a group of Christians and Muslims came together afterward, to learn about one another’s faiths, to seek some common ground, and to find a way to stand against the violence that the government has allowed to continue. She said that the violence has quieted down because this movement has grown. “They are praying for us, and they are protecting us,” she said.

Where has the generosity of others made possible something in your life? And where might your generosity of heart or spirit make something possible for others? May your generosity be grounded in God’s creative and loving impulse, the grace and reconciling heart of Christ, and the sustaining strength of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹⁴ @Pontifex 6/10/17.

¹⁵ For statistics, see “Peshawar church bombing,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peshawar_church_bombing.