

Trinity Sunday - May 26, 2024

Matthew 28:16–20

“The Many Names of God”

1. I have noticed, as my friends are becoming grandparents, a tradition that has fascinated me for years: the choosing of what name grandparents want their grandkids to call them by
 - a. I first became intrigued with this tradition when I became a pastor in St. Anne, a community which had been started by French Canadian immigrants in the mid 1800s.
 - b. One of our friends and church member, Lynn, had her grandkids call her Mim.
 - c. That’s when I began to notice how every set of grandparents put some real thought into what their grandkids would call them.
 - d. Google the topic, and you’ll find a wide array of suggestions for those names
 - e. They are all affectionate names, some with versions of names in languages brought in by immigrants, some have a rural twist, some are new and original.
 - f. I guess I’m boring simply asking my grandkids to call me grandpa.
2. Today is Trinity Sunday, a time when we pause to consider that theological mystery of who God is (I suppose that’s our task every Sunday!), and that brings us to the idea of the name of God
 - a. The name by which we speak of God has been a point of conversation from the very moment we humans started pondering the divine
 - b. You may recall that when Moses came face to face with God at the burning bush, and Moses asked for God’s name, God offered a cryptic answer that seemed more description than name, which our Bibles translate to something like “I am who I am / I will be who I will be”
 - c. That special name is only four consonants long (ancient and modern Hebrew do not write in vowels), which if we transliterate the letters to English it would be YHWH
 - i. We don’t really know what original vowel sounds would have gone with it
 - ii. (fill in some vowels and you get Jehovah, like the Jehovah Witnesses, for ex)
 - d. But in the Jewish tradition, it is forbidden to speak God’s real name (that “I am who I am”), and when reading the scriptures, as the reader comes to the name, they substitute the title “Adonai” which means Lord, or some say “Ha Shem” which means “the name”
 - e. In some of your Bibles, you’ll notice every so often, particularly in the Psalms, that the words “THE LORD” will sometimes show up in all CAPS. That’s our clue as a reader that we’ve come to the not-to-be-pronounced divine name in the original Hebrew.
 - f. Things get even more complicated when we realize that
 - i. at times God speaks of Godself in the plural, like in the creation story in Genesis (“Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...’”)
 - ii. and then we read about the Spirit of God
 - iii. And of course, eventually we read about Jesus, the Son of God, the Word made flesh

- g. We affirm, of course, that God is One, but over the centuries we've wrestled to make sense of that notion of the Trinity, the God three-in-one.
 - i. Our Gospel passage offers us one of the ways in which we've tried to come to terms with it, by naming all three persons in the Trinity during a baptism: God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit.
 - ii. But to try to define the indescribable, to try to pin down in words the expanse of the universe is an impossible task, which we keep trying to wrap our heads around.
- h. In the Muslim tradition, in the Qur'an and in the collection of the words of the Prophet Muhammad, there are some 99 names for God, which Muslims use in prayers etc., usually referring to God by attributes: God The Most Gracious, God The Giver of Peace, God The Provider...
- i. Historically, Christian poets and theologians have let their imaginations and spirits explore, as they have tried to use our limited human languages to lift up the name of God.
- j. Wil Gafney, the scholar whose biblical translation we've been using for the past year and a half, offers us a collection of Trinity names she has gathered, some of which we've used in the liturgy today.
 - i. I'm going to invite you to close your eyes, if you're comfortable.
 - ii. Put both feet flat on the floor, and rest your hands palm down on your thighs.
 - iii. Feel the ground holding your feet, and the pew holding your body
 - iv. Slowly take in a deep breath through your nose, and slowly let it out through your mouth
 - v. Listen now to the interplay among these divine Trinity names, and pay close attention to how they touch your heart:
 - vi. God is...
 - vii. Sovereign, Savior, and Shelter;
 - viii. Author, Word, and Translator;
 - ix. Parent, Partner, and Friend;
 - x. Majesty, Mercy, and Mystery;
 - xi. Creator, Christ, and Compassion;
 - xii. Potter, Vessel, and Holy Fire;
 - xiii. Life, Liberation, and Love.
 - xiv. Slowly take in a deep breath through your nose, and slowly let it out through your mouth
 - xv. Feel God's presence in you and around you, in ways that words won't do it justice.
 - xvi. What's are the names of God which lingered in your heart from the ones I read, or the ones you've known all your life?
 - xvii. If you use one of those words to speak to God in a prayer, would it be a prayer of thanksgiving, or a prayer asking for healing, or a prayer seeking guidance?
 - xviii. Jesus said: Go and make disciples, baptizing them, in the name of...
 - 1. The Father, Son, Holy Spirit

2. Sovereign, Savior, and Shelter;
 3. Author, Word, and Translator;
 4. Parent, Partner, and Friend;
 5. Majesty, Mercy, and Mystery;
 6. Creator, Christ, and Compassion;
 7. Potter, Vessel, and Holy Fire;
 8. Life, Liberation, and Love.
- xix. Slowly take in a deep breath through your nose, and slowly let it out through your mouth
 - xx. Slowly open your eyes.
3. Thanks be to God for God's word for us.

Reflection Questions

1. Think of the ways in which you refer to God in your prayers – calling God “Father” or “Holy One” or “Eternal God” or another name.
2. Sunday is Trinity Sunday. In the traditional baptismal liturgy, we follow Jesus' instructions to the disciples in Mathew 28:16-20 to baptize “in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” What would be three other divine names / words / qualities we could dream up to refer to the Trinity?
3. Which one person in the Trinity feels closer to your heart when you think about God? Why do you think that is?