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Sermon preached at Redeemer Lutheran Church, Bangor, ME
June 11, 2017—Holy Trinity
Texts: Genesis 1:1-2:4a, Matthew 28:16-20

Talking about God

Every person of faith, every community of faith through the ages, struggles to talk about the mystery of what we call God. We struggle to find words for what is ultimate in our lives and in the world around us, seen and unseen. How could we not struggle? To find words or images for the infinite mystery, to describe a moment in which we encountered something beyond and yet somehow within ourselves—this is not easy work. It's the work we call "theology"—words about God. By definition, in theology we are addressing something we can't fully grasp with our mind or even with our heart. Mystics and theologians through the ages have pointed this out: If we do not run out of words when we talk about God, then it is probably not God we are talking about. (I'll say that again: If we do not run out of words when we talk about God, then it is probably not God we are talking about.)

But here we have this day in the church year devoted to such words, words about God as a Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Not three Gods, but one, in "three persons." It's difficult to grasp with either our minds or our hearts. This is the only day of the church year devoted to a doctrine. When we say that word, "doctrine," many people either tune out or go on guard somehow. We are all too familiar with the ways doctrine—the codification of beliefs—has divided people in history and continues to do so today, between Christian denominations, within congregations, between nations. Doctrine is all too often used as a test to exclude people—"if you believe this, then you can be one of Us; otherwise you are one of Them." Doctrine is all too often used to shut down questioning and enforce uniformity. At best, for many of us, doctrine fails to inspire very much.

So why on earth would we devote a day to a doctrine, especially one as slippery and confusing as the Trinity? We *could* see it as a day to reinforce the in-doctrin-ation we might have received in Sunday School or confirmation class. "One in three persons—okay, we've got it." Not very inspiring and not very appropriate to the actual *mystery* of God.

Perhaps instead we might see this day as an invitation. We are invited to remember that doctrines arose from real communities wrestling with words about God's infinite mystery, and running out of words as we all do, but nevertheless passing on what they learned along the way to the generation who came after them, and the one after that, and the one after that. Perhaps this day could also invite us to see that on the way to running out of words, talking about God, doing theology, is actually kind of interesting and really important to how we see ourselves and the world.

So I'll share three examples of historical Christian communities doing theology—and after each example, it will be your turn to ponder a question together. I'm going to invite you to do this in pairs, because conversation is the best way to do theology. You can pair up with someone sitting near you, or someone you came to church with today, or you can move

around if you need to. You won't be asked to share anything with the larger group afterward. "In community" is the best way to do theology, but for some of us who are more introverted, there is plenty of community just inside our own mind! So if the best conversation you could have right now is in your head, you can do that—don't worry if someone approaches you, just tell them you are your own conversation this morning. (I just hope *some* people choose to talk, or we are going to have a lot of awkward silence!)

So, first community: Let's go back to the people of Israel in the 6th century B.C., after they have been taken into captivity in Babylon. We refer to this period of Israel's history as the exile. The exile forced people into a lot of hard theological work because it called into question everything Israel's faith had been based on. Israel had understood itself as blessed by God because God had liberated them from slavery in Egypt and given them a land and a king—signs of God's blessing. Now, however, the land and the king are gone, apparently never to return. Had God abandoned them? Is there any reason for hope? What could unite them as God's people now? Like all humans, they can see all the good things they have lost, more clearly than they can see what blessings might lie ahead. That was the work their theologians did. The theologians of the exile were some of the most important editors of the Hebrew Scriptures, what we refer to as the Old Testament. As they collected and edited stories that had been told for generations, they emphasized stories that showed God as a God of blessing from the beginning of time, who would always be a God of blessing.

One of the stories these theologians contributed to the Scriptures was the first story of creation in Genesis. To a people in exile, it reminded them that human beings carried the image of God. It was in their DNA, so to speak. Despite everything, they could still look around them and see in each other and the world the creator God, who is bigger than any one nation. United as God's creatures, they could also be united in the practices of faith even outside their land, one of the most important being the practice of Sabbath. Sabbath is a day to remember that despite everything, God has proclaimed the world "very good."

So on this Sabbath today, I ask *you*: **Where have you seen the goodness of God's creation recently?** Let's take just a minute or two to ponder that together.

Second community: Now we go back to the community from which Matthew's gospel emerged. Matthew began his gospel with the promise of Emmanuel, meaning "God with us." He ends it with a promise of Christ who is with us always. But who exactly is the "us"? Matthew's community are Jewish Christians—Jews who have come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah who had been promised to their people for generations. Throughout the story, there is some uncertainty about Jesus' ministry and whom it was really for. At one point Jesus says he was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And yet there are also stories of people from other nations responding to Jesus, like the magi ("Wise Men") who traveled from afar to see him at his birth.

Now here at the end of the gospel, it is settled once and for all: anyone can be a follower of Jesus' way, regardless of what nation you're from. The apostles are sent out to share the good news of God's love revealed through Jesus. The message is not limited to Israel alone. *Anyone* can belong to God and experience God's presence "to the end of the age," no matter

where they come from. This passage known as the “great commission” has sometimes been distorted to say that it is a Christian’s job to ensure that *everyone* follows Jesus. But in the context of Matthew’s community, interpreting it as *anyone* seems more appropriate. God’s embrace is wider than we ever imagined. It is the ultimate inclusive finish to a story that hadn’t always seemed quite sure about that along the way.

When we think of the wideness of God’s embrace, we think of the extent of God’s mercy and forgiveness. They are so much bigger than we can imagine. So let’s ponder the 2nd question now: **When have you been challenged to see yourself or someone else as included in God’s loving embrace?**

For our third community, let’s fast forward to the 4th century. Christianity is still relatively young, and it’s a challenging time for Christian communities. All kinds of teachers are arising here and there with different theologies, and some are threatening to take the whole thing off track. In particular, people are trying to make sense of how Christ’s humanity and divinity go together. In order to keep the faith, they need to agree on what words about God they will pass on to the next generation. So some Christian leaders meet in a town called Nicaea and come up with a creed, the one we now call the Nicene Creed. It becomes something solid they can hold onto, when everything around seems to be confusing and changing. The creed helps people say, “Here’s what we can agree on. Here’s what we will teach.”

What do you hang onto during your own challenging times? Let’s ponder our third question: **In your own difficult time, what gave you hope and helped you “keep the faith”?**

As we struggle to find our own words about God, we stand in a long line of theologians doing this work:

Trying to find hope for the future, when the future is so much less clear than the past we have lost.

Being challenged again and again to be as inclusive as God’s love really is.

Holding onto the stories that help us keep faith with God and one another in challenging times.

In doing this work this morning, you have been doing Trinitarian theology. We say sometimes that God’s work is creating, redeeming, and sustaining. While they are never separate, those roughly correspond to the three persons of the Trinity—God the creator, Christ the redeemer, and the sustaining Holy Spirit. Thank you for taking on the Mystery in your conversation this morning. May the conversation continue!

Hymn of the Day: ELW 673, God Whose Almighty Word