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St. John's Episcopal Church
Trinity Sunday C10 / May 30

This morning, the Church gathers to celebrate Trinity Sunday ~ the *only* festival of the Church year that focuses on a specific *doctrine* of the Church. The Trinity has always been a mystery; an *enigma* for which there is no illustration that works perfectly. Some will recall that I once explained that the Trinity was like water: it had three states of being but could not be different states at the same time. The next day, two parishioners told me that it *could* ~ and thus my favorite illustration for the Trinity no longer “held water” (so to speak). In John's Gospel, we heard Jesus saying to his disciples that he still had many things to say, but that they could not bear them now ~ apparently the inner workings of the Trinity was one of those things.

However, although the Trinity cannot be adequately illustrated, that does not mean that the Trinity cannot be adequately *explained*. And one of the best explanations for the Trinity was born in 1934 when Karl Hartenstein, a German missiologist, coined the phrase *missio Dei*. *Missio Dei* is a Latin theological term that means “the mission of God” or “the sending of God”.

This is how it works. When describing God the Father, many make the association with God the Creator. So we say, because it is what we believe, that God the Father created the world. When describing God the Son, many make the association with Jesus' redemption of humanity, a redemption that took place through the cross. And so we say, because it is what we believe, that God the Son *redeemed* the world. Then we come to God the Holy Spirit ~ the third being in the Trinity's trifacta. So what can we say about God the Holy Spirit? Many will recall from last Sunday, that Pentecost was the birthday of the Church in mission. And thus it is said, because it is what we believe, that God the Holy Spirit is what empowers the Church to take the news of God's redemption into God's created world. In a nutshell: God the Father created the

world; God the Son redeemed the world; and God the Holy Spirit is what empowers the Church to take the news of God's redemption out into God's created world.

A couple of weeks ago, a newly consecrated bishop made the remark that she was looking forward to helping the Holy Spirit in the mission of the Church. Some critics jumped on that statement and asked, "Does she really think that the Holy Spirit needs her help?" This is a very telling question; because those who made that statement obviously see the Trinity as being a closed system. That is, they believe that God is going to do whatever God wants to do ~ and that God did *not* create us to be in partnership with Him.

I would therefore like to propose a little experiment: Next Sunday, I propose that everyone who believes that the Trinity is a closed system should stay home. *Everyone* who believes that the Holy Spirit does not empower Christians to further the mission of the Church, everyone who believes that the Holy Spirit does not need our help ~ for one Sunday, I suggest that they should all stay home, including the clergy and church staff! They should *not* get into their cars and drive to a worship service ~ because if the Holy Spirit *wants* them there to praise God and to give thanks to God and to offer their prayers to God; if the Holy Spirit wants them there to greet newcomers and seekers; if the Holy Spirit wants the Word to be preached and the sacraments to be celebrated and to have Christian Education for the children; then the Holy Spirit will find a way to pick everybody up and bring them to church! (I wonder what kind of car the Holy Spirit would drive?) Not only *that*, but the Holy Spirit will also write the sermon, rehearse the music, prepare the lesson plans, set the altar, and compose the bulletin all by itself! Did everyone see the juice in the narthex that will be taken to the Food Pantry? I bet you didn't know that the Holy Spirit buys groceries at Stop & Shop, did you? Or that the Holy Spirit quilts prayer shawls for people in the hospital and takes the sacraments to the homebound. You get the picture.

The truth of the matter is this: everything that I just mentioned? Coming to church, teaching Sunday School, rehearsing the choir, bringing offerings for the hungry, making prayer shawls? The Holy Spirit does do *all* of those things. Each and every one! But the Holy Spirit does them *with us*. We are the ones who have been *inspired* by the Holy Spirit, inspired with joy! We are the ones who are *empowered* by the Holy Spirit and, as a result, are so filled with love that we do what we do because we love God and because we are in *relationship* with God. We do what we do because we have said “Yes” to God’s invitation to work in partnership with Him. And through that partnership, we have found our love of God and of each other deepened ~ almost to the point of being indescribable. Much like the Trinity is almost indescribable.

Now let me be clear: I am *not* saying that humanity is on an *equal level* with God. Perish that thought, quickly. I *am* saying, however, that human beings were not created by God to be His puppets. We do not have strings which God will yank when He wants us to do something. We have been given free will ~ and an invitation to work with God in accomplishing the mission of sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ with the entire world. So in essence, the mission of the Church is humanity’s way of sharing with God, in relationship and in partnership, God’s mission of redeeming the world.

And this is very, *very* good news. It’s good news because it frees us from the mistaken belief that God is simply going around the world, doing His own thing, and that we have no control and therefore have no responsibility. It’s also good news because it frees us from the mistaken belief that it’s all up to *us*. That is, it frees us from viewing ourselves as being the sole agents of change, apart from God. When it comes to mission, *God’s* mission ~ God needs us and we very much need God.

Throughout the stories of Scripture, we read the stories of the lives of people who were obviously in relationship with God and who worked in partnership with God in furthering God’s

mission. God needed Abraham. God needed Moses. God needed Joseph, Mary, the disciples ~ *and God needs us*. Church communities who do not see themselves as being a part of God's mission ~ Christians who simply *wait* for people to walk into their church in droves, ready, willing, and able to do everything that needs to be done (in the way, of course, that *we* want them to do those things ☺) ~ those Christian communities will not make it. The mission will fail. And why? Because God did not create the Church to be a closed system. God is not a closed system. The *Trinity* is not a closed system. Instead, the system is very, very open; very, very wide; and the invitation to join is very, very strong.

Therefore, whenever you encounter the symbol of the Trinity; or whenever the word comes up in conversation or in study; as opposed to thinking of the Trinity as something that is difficult to explain, look at it instead as being a symbol of your own personal invitation. View it as being God's special invitation to *you* to join Him in mission. Remember: God the Father created the world; God the Son redeemed the world; and God the Holy Spirit wants to empower *you* ~ God the Holy Spirit wants to *invite* you ~ to share with God in the mission of taking the news of God's redemption out into all of God's created world.