



First United Church of Oak Park

Fissures and Faith

John 1:1-14, 16

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May 27, 2018

“Who do you say I am?” Jesus asks the disciples that question in the 8th chapter of Mark. If you recall that text, you will remember that most of the disciples give varying responses: people say you are John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the prophets. But Peter responds, “You are the Christ.” In Matthew’s version of the same story Peter gives a fuller theological response: “You are the Christ, son of the living God.”

I find it interesting, though not the least bit surprising, that the 12 disciples who walked through Galilee with Jesus, and knew him well, do not have a consistent answer to the question, “Who do you say that I am?” I’m sure that if we gathered 12 deeply faithful and thoughtful people together after church, people from First United, or from Unity Temple, or from Grace Episcopal Church, or representatives from all three congregations, and we asked them to tell us who they think Jesus is, we would also hear varying answers. Those answers would likely be scattered across a spectrum, some focusing more on the humanity and earthiness of Jesus, and others perhaps focusing on his Godliness and divine nature. Some might focus more on Jesus as an advocate for the poor. Others might focus more on Jesus as a healer, or a storyteller. There is no one way to think about Jesus, and maybe there never has been.

Today is Trinity Sunday, the day in the church year that we lift up the theological doctrine of the Trinity. Who Jesus is, is at the heart of Trinitarian doctrine which, in brief, posits that there is one God, and that one God is known in three different persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Westminster Longer Catechism, a document that used to define Presbyterian theology, says that these persons are “the same in substance, equal in power and glory; although distinguished in their personal properties.”¹ When asked why we believe this, another one of our foundational documents, the Heidelberg Catechism, is a little more blunt. It says, we believe this because God says so.²

I have to be careful here, because when I start talking about the doctrine of the Trinity, I become even less comprehensible than the person who wrote the gospel of John: “In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God, and the word was with God in the beginning.” The words kind of weave together, and they don’t always make sense. So, today, I’m doing you a favor and just giving you the basics: one God, three persons, same substance, equal to each other in power and glory.

If you think this doesn’t make a lot of sense, do not worry. People have been trying to figure this out for years. Michael Servetus, the brilliant 16th century physician who was the first person to figure out how blood circulates in our body - smart guy - got into huge trouble with John Calvin, our theological forefather, because Servetus said that the Trinity made no sense, and asserted instead that the Son was not of the same substance as the father. You know what happened to Servetus? He got burned at the stake.

¹ Westminster Longer Catechism, in The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Book I: The Book of Confessions (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly), 7.119.

² The Heidelberg Catechism, in The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Book I: The Book of Confessions (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly), 4.025.

This stuff is almost as good as watching Game of Thrones. People have been at each other's throats over the doctrine of the Trinity, over the question of "Who do you say that I am?"

The doctrine of the Trinity is not found in the Bible, as Michael Servetus pointed out. We do have the Gospel of John and other biblical documents, in which Jesus talks about God as his Father, and himself as the Son, and weaves it all sort of together. So we have hints of Trinitarian theology in the bible, but we don't have it full-blown. That all comes later in the second and third centuries, when there are competing opinions about who Jesus is. Most of these opinions emerge because people are trying to explain the relationship between God, Jesus, and the Spirit, and put words to the church's experience that Jesus is both human and divine at the same time. How does that work?

Was Jesus just another guy, who God decided was so special that God adopted him at his baptism? In that version, Jesus becomes human and divine at about age 30.

Or, did Jesus become divine at the moment that he was divinely conceived in Mary?³ In that version, Jesus becomes divine about 9 months before he's born.

Or, was Jesus with God at the beginning, part of God all the time, like the gospel of John suggests?

Or, maybe Jesus was never really human. Maybe his human form was just an apparition, and he's only divine, not human at all.⁴

All these ideas were floating around in the early church, and some of them still are. In the fourth century, theologians had a big knock-down, drag out fight about these issues, at a church council in Nicea, which is one of about a gazillion church meetings people have had to thrash out these ideas. There were winners and losers at Nicea. The winners were those who supported the Trinitarian theology that has come to be defined as orthodox. They codified that theology in the creed we are saying this morning.

The losers were all the people whose theology came to be defined as heresy. Their theologies persisted, however. They didn't just go away because they lost, and for hundreds of years there continued to be churches that thought about their Jesus differently from their more "orthodox" brothers and sisters.

The fights about who Jesus is, and the precise nature of his humanity and divinity, emerged again about a hundred years after Nicea. But this time, it was not fought out in a church council. It was fought with hymns. Apparently, the heretics had all the good hymns, and they taught them to lay men and women. The hymnologist CS Phillips says they shared them in port cities with dockhands and sailors, who would sing them in torchlight processions through the town.⁵

In response, the orthodox leaders, who were really not so into hymnody, got on board really quickly, and some of the groundwork for the hymns we sing today was laid at that time. Ambrose of Milan, for example, the author of the hymn we are about to sing, developed long metered hymnody: 4-line stanzas with 8 syllables per

³ The virgin birth is another post-biblical doctrine that emerges to help us understand how Jesus is divine and human at the same time, but that is a topic for another sermon.

⁴ Even though it's not a great academic resource, I got a quick refresher about this material from Wikipedia.

⁵ C.S. Phillips, *Hymnody Past and Present* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1937), 27-29.

line. Every time you see the letters LM alongside a hymn, you have Ambrose of Milan to thank for the meter of the poetry you are singing.

And it is poetry. When we say the creed, or when we sing the lyrics of these hymns, it is clear that ancient writers resorted to metaphor and image to talk about their Jesus. The doctrine of the Trinity points to a mystery that we apprehend in ways we cannot always comprehend. Whether or not we are able to put our understanding of God, Jesus, and Spirit into rational theological language, and most of us cannot, we can still speak its truth in a creed, we can sing its poetry, and we can encounter it in a shared supper. In all these experiences, we are invited into God's mystery, God's truth, and God's beauty.