

Sermon Preached by The Rev. John S. Nieman  
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
June 11, 2017 Trinity Sunday/Year A  
Texts -- Genesis 1:1-2:4a; Psalm 8; 2 Corinthians 13:11-13; Matthew 28:16-20

Last week I talked a little about Thelonious Monk. Somehow, on Pentecost, I thought the great bebop composer and pianist might shed some light on the Holy Spirit. Today I want to continue with the avant-garde music theme and talk about the somewhat volatile British drummer, Ginger Baker. You see, I think he might help shed some light on the nature of the Trinity, the feast we celebrate today. Stay with me here.

Ginger Baker has been out of the limelight for the most part since the early 70's, although he has continued to hone his craft up to the present. In his time, he was arguably the greatest drummer the rock and roll world had seen up to that point – and maybe has seen ever since. Yet, Ginger Baker himself would detest that description. Not because he's self-effacing. Far from it. It's just that he repudiates anyone who tries to put him into a musical box, to categorize him. And if he were in the room today, he likely would come right up here and whack me with his cane for saying that he was the greatest rock and roll drummer of all time. That's no joke; Ginger Baker has never hesitated to act on his feelings, including by punching someone out. Fortunately for those who have had to live in his orbit, he's channeled most of his ferocity into his drumming.

Baker's musical mentors were some of the best jazz drummers of the 40's and 50's. So some have classified him as a jazz drummer. He learned from them to listen carefully to the rhythms of Africa, and quickly made them his own. He even lived in Nigeria and South Africa for extended periods of time. So some have called him an early interpreter of "world music," whatever that is. But because he became famous when he teamed up with Eric Clapton and Jack Bruce to form the late 60's band, Cream, he's known to most as a rock and roll drummer.

It's the categories that tick him off. He simply hates to be classified as anything. That's why, if you ever meet him on the street, don't call him the greatest rock and roll drummer of all time to his face. He'll be deeply offended, will likely get extremely angry, and will probably call you an idiot, preceded by a string of expletives. That's just the kind of person he is. He is not someone I would recommend anyone emulate. His life has been a mess.

But in a strange way, Ginger Baker is a living lesson to people of faith like us who, throughout the centuries, have tried to put God into a box, to categorize God, to get our arms around God, so that we can feel a little more comfortable – a little more in control – in the face of infinite, incomparable mystery. By attaching descriptors to God, we can pretend we know something of what we're talking about. We all do it. Short of complete silence, we can't avoid it. That's why silence, in the end, is the only *absolutely* true response to God.

Our ancestors in the faith worked very hard to try to protect us from the foolishness of our tendency to squeeze God into our neat boxes. Some even died for it. So one of the gifts they bequeathed to us was the doctrine of the Trinity. Now, I know many of you might be thinking, "thanks a lot; what a gift!" I know a lot of preachers who would be happy to do without such generosity. For sure, the Trinity has thrown theologians into mental pretzels for at least seventeen centuries. And some have thought that the doctrine itself is an attempt to put God in a box, the box of 3 in 1, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But that's not what it is at all.

The doctrine of the Trinity is at the very heart of the Christian life. It is the core understanding of God for us Christians. We refer to it repeatedly every time we come together for worship. We open the Eucharist with it: "Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit." We baptize in the name of it. The Creed we say each week takes its shape from it. The Trinity is strewn throughout our worship life – and rightly so.

Yet there is a tendency among modern Christians who give any thought to these things to casually dismiss the Trinity. After all, it's a doctrine that comes to us from antiquity and makes no logical sense: three in one, one in three – how do you make sense of that? But I think a bigger issue is that so many of us are programmed to bristle at anything that comes to us as a fundamental, an unquestioned dogma. We

Episcopalians especially tend to keep our distance from doctrines and dogmas, lest we be accused of the greatest sin, which is to be doctrinaire, or worse, dogmatic. I know that there are plenty of closet Unitarians sitting out there today and every Sunday. (Oh, go ahead; admit it.)

I want to invite us to look at the Trinity the way I think our very wise forebears looked at it. A doctrine – yes. A central one, in fact. But a doctrine not designed to confine God to a set of categories, a theological box; but rather one to spark our imaginations, one to draw us into the wonder of God. The problem is that we get so caught up sometimes in pointing out the logical conundrums of the doctrine, or dismissing it as irrelevant, that we miss the stunning beauty and startling truth of what it's trying to convey, even in its clumsy, almost non-sensical way.

What is that beautiful, stunning truth? God is relationship. Hear that. God *is* relationship. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – distinct persons, yet bound necessarily together in the unity of the Godhead. God is nothing apart from a community of persons. To put it differently – without relationship, God is not.

At the core of our notion of Trinity is the conviction that there is dynamism within God. There is relationship within God. Christians did not invent that idea. The ancient story tellers among our Jewish ancestors bequeathed it to us. The creator God of the opening chapter of Genesis expresses that inner dynamism. “Let *us* make humankind in *our* image,” says God. “Elohim,” the Hebrew name for God in this text, is grammatically a plural word. That introduces an intriguing ambiguity. At the very least, our ancestors in their wisdom knew that the dynamism of God could not be captured in a singular form. They of course were not Trinitarian; we can't project our theology back onto them. But they did pass on to the world the basic truth that God is inherently relational – God is One, for sure, but a relational One.

And wherever there is dynamism rather than stasis, wherever there is relationship rather than isolation, wherever there is God, in other words, there is the unnamable, there is wonder, there is mystery. And you can't put mystery in a box, no matter how hard you try. You cannot grasp God's fullness in categories.

For many people, that's a problem. We, in our left brained society, don't like things that can't be pinned down or mapped out or categorized. That's why we need poets, and artists, and even messed up, ferocious drummers. They teach us to experience the world differently. They open us to the possibility of a fuller experience of God.

But there's more to all of this. What's true of God is also true of us. And why would it be otherwise? We are made in God's image after all, as our reading from Genesis reminds us. You and I, like God, *are* relationship. We come into being through relationship, and we sustain our life in community, in communion with one another. That's why we come here each week and gather around this table. Together, not in isolation, but together we share in God's life. Like God, without a community of persons, we are not.

Relationships, like the doctrine of the Trinity, are messy things. Anyone who is in one, knows that. Relationships don't lend themselves to neat logic, tidy packages, or clear-cut explanations. No. At the end of the day, relationships are inexplicable. How else can we account for the some of the enduring, sometimes wondrous, relationships that seem to defy all logic?

We are, we have our being, to the extent we reflect what God is. And what is God? God is relationship. That is why the medieval mystics such as Julian of Norwich were not so much baffled by the Trinity as much as they were utterly delighted by it. Perhaps her words will be an invitation to us to share in her delight.

Suddenly the Trinity completely filled my heart with the greatest joy. This is how, I realized, it will be in heaven, without end, for those who go there. The Trinity is God, and God is the Trinity; the Trinity is our maker and our keeper; the Trinity is our everlasting lover, our endless joy and our bliss....  
(*Revelations of Divine Love, Long Text, Chapter 4*)