

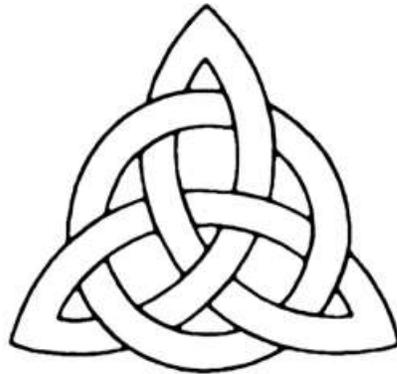
May 27, 2018
Trinity Sunday

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Bound”

The Rev Amy Starr Redwine



I BIND UNTO MYSELF TODAY
THE STRONG NAME OF THE TRINITY,
BY INVOCATION OF THE SAME,
THE THREE IN ONE, AND ONE IN THREE.

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Romans 8:12-17

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh — for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ — if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

Bound

Miles away from any main road, in the rolling mountains of western North Carolina, George Vanderbilt, an heir to the Vanderbilt fortune, bought up nearly 700 parcels of land and built what he called his "little mountain escape." The Biltmore estate is now the largest privately-owned home in America, with nearly one hundred and eighty thousand square feet, one hundred and one bedrooms and forty-three bathrooms. For reference, the entire building we are in now is about a hundred thousand square feet, so this house is almost twice as big. The Biltmore mansion served as a private home for a little over thirty years, at which point George Vanderbilt's daughter and son-in-law opened it to the public. Now, nearly ninety years later, subsequent generations of Vanderbilts have capitalized on our attraction to extravagance and beauty, and for just seventy-five dollars a day, you can visit the mansions and its gardens and grounds designed by the same landscape designer who created New York's, Central Park.

When I visited the Biltmore, I was, like I imagine most visitors are, awe-struck. It is mind-blowing to imagine living there or even staying for a visit although I suspect some of you music lovers could get used to having a Skinner organ in your dining room which has a seven-story ceiling to accommodate the pipes! The vision of Isaiah which Katherine read for us earlier offers us a mind-blowing glimpse of the divine. It is as if young Isaiah went to church one morning not unlike all of us here today and in the middle of the usual, predictable dare I say boring service of worship, he enters into a dream-like state during which he peaks behind the curtain that normally separates the human from the holy.

What Isaiah sees in his vision is not the sedate and upbeat, "holy, holy, holy" of our hymn his is the awe-inspiring, bewildering, terrifying God of all creation. This God is so large that the entire temple is filled just with the hem of God's robes. And the seraphs Isaiah describes tending to God are not the chubby baby angels we might imagine from sacred art these seraphs are enormous flying serpents huge snakes with wings.

Isaiah is not just awe-struck, he is terrified, as any one of us would be. And beyond that, he utterly and entirely humbled by this glimpse of God's holiness, God's otherness. Isaiah received this vision at a moment when God's people were in transition. The passage begins with the words, "in the year King Uzziah died..." King Uzziah had been a good and faithful king, so his death brought

with it questions fraught with anxiety. What would happen next in the story of God's people? Would the new king maintain peace and stability or bring conflict and uncertainty?

We hear this passage on this day that marks a transition for us as well. As you might remember, the church year began back at the beginning of December, with the season we call Advent, when we prepared to remember Jesus's birth. After Christmas, we observed several milestone events in Jesus's life: the epiphany, when foreign royalty follow the star to Jesus's birthplace; the baptism that marks the beginning of Jesus's ministry; all the events leading up to the last supper Jesus shares with his disciples;

Jesus's trial and crucifixion and resurrection and ascension; the birth of the church with the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. For the past several months, our worshiping life together has been focused on this journey from Advent to Pentecost, and we today mark the transition into the season we call "ordinary time." The opportunity we have during this time is the opportunity to respond. We do not spend months in worship remembering God's work through Jesus and the Holy Spirit as a commemoration, but as part of the ongoing transformation that takes place as we encounter the truth of God's love and forgiveness, a truth which is not abstract, but as real as the hot coal that burned Isaiah's sin away. It is this awareness of God's love and forgiveness that calls us to respond to the same question Isaiah heard: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"

In the church year, this particular Sunday that transitions us from remembrance to response, is also the Sunday that is set apart for us to consider what it means that we claim that our God is not just defined by unity but by the Trinity. What does it mean to claim that our God is one in three and three in one and how does that claim affect our response to God's call to us to share the gospel? Of course, any mention of the Trinity is absent from Isaiah's vision and, for that matter, from most of the Bible. But what Isaiah's vision and the concept of the Trinity have in common is that they both reveal a God utterly mysterious, beyond human comprehension.

Like Isaiah's vision of the holy, the trinitarian nature of God is not something our minds can ever adequately understand or explain. No matter how hard we have worked to grasp who God is by focusing on the life and teachings of Jesus

or the movement and work of the Spirit, the Trinity forces us to admit that our God is infinitely more complex than we can imagine.

The Biltmore mansion took nearly seven years to build. Because of the volume of construction materials required, a woodworking factory and a brick kiln were built onsite, producing some thirty-two thousand bricks a day. More than one thousand workers and sixty stonemasons labored on the house, arriving each day on a rail line that brought them to work from the Biltmore village, which itself was created to house the thousands of people working to build the estate.

Even after the house was finished and the evidence of construction was covered over by the meticulously-tended gardens, the inside of the house still reveals the incredible resources it took to operate such a home. Hundreds of square feet are devoted to pantries that look more like small grocery stores, there is a kitchen twice as big as those in most restaurants, three separate rooms are dedicated to washing and drying laundry, and there are all kinds of innovations, like electric dumbwaiters that could deliver a beautifully arranged tray of food up four floors.

I arrived at the Biltmore utterly awe-struck at the scale and the beauty of the estate, but what stayed with me were the pictures of the thousands of workers who built the house, and the evidence of all those who were needed to make the house a home for its inhabitants. That extraordinary estate, which, in its heyday, functioned like a finely tuned machine, only functioned so well because of all those who worked behind the scenes.

There is more to God than we can grasp by looking only at any one part of God's nature parent, child, or spirit. And as human beings created in God's image, we reflect this complex and relational and interconnected God – as individuals and as a church. The church cannot be understood just by what we see or hear or experience in worship: not by the hymns we sing or the scriptures we hear or the words we read in the bulletin.

The church is not just its members or its pastors; it is not just what we do here on Sunday or any other day of the week. Just as God can only be truly understood by considering all aspects of the divine nature parent, child, spirit so the church in its truest form is not just one aspect of the church but all of it together. It is the integration of these different forms that give us, the church, our strength.

I learned to braid as a young child visiting my grandparents in Albany, Georgia. In almost every season, their yard was strewn with pine needles that had come off of their trees, and the needles were most often grouped in sets of three, anchored by the place where they had been attached to a tree. My grandmother patiently showed me how to take each of the outside needles in turn into the center and, by doing so, create a braid. Without three sections, a braid cannot hold; if there are only two strands twisted around each other, they untwist themselves as soon as you let them go. But when three are braided together, something new is created, and this new creation has strength and stability that three separate strands can never have.

Because our celebration of Easter does not happen on the same date every year, our observance of Trinity Sunday does not usually fall on Memorial Day weekend. But it is helpful to consider that this theological truth is also reflected in our nation's history of honoring our differences, since America was founded on an idea of diversity, that in many, we are one. This plays out in the halls of Congress, in the reporting of our free press, at the site of protests, and on the battlefield. We live in a country that recognizes that we are stronger because of our diversity, even when that diversity is as challenging and disturbing and terrifying as Isaiah's glimpse at the majesty and mystery of the holy God.

When he has that vision, Isaiah's immediate response is the recognition of his sinfulness and of God's mercy. Isaiah is not called because he is better than anyone else; he is a forgiven sinner called to speak God's word to God's called and forgiven people.

Every one of us has a calling, and, though our callings may take many different forms, what they all have in common is that we are not called because we are set apart as better than anyone else, but because we are the recipients of God's love and forgiveness, and that love and forgiveness demand a response. The fact that the Trinity represents our God is a constant reminder that not one of us can live out our calling alone or in isolation; the very nature of God is the dynamic and creative relationship that exists between these three different aspects of God which interact and draw strength from one another in an intricate and holy dance.

Every day, we are invited to claim our identity as the beloved children of God, we who, as Paul reminds us, became heirs to this extraordinary kingdom, not by birth like George Vanderbilt inheriting his grandfather's wealth but by the

life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and by the ongoing work of the Spirit that makes us members of God's household.

No matter what task we have been called to do, we are each integral to the household of God. Alone, we cannot create the kingdom God calls us to establish. Alone, we cannot reflect the image of God in which we were created, for that image is the interwoven, interconnected, interdependent Trinity.

Today in worship, we glimpse the wonder and majesty and mystery of God. Today, and every day, we are called to answer God's question, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Today, may we respond, individually and also together, using both our uniqueness and our interconnectedness to share God's love with the world, to create on earth the beloved, diverse community that is a true reflection of the mysterious, powerful, relational nature of our God.

Amen.