Trinity Sunday
Genesis 1:26-27, 2 Corinthians 13:11-13, Matthew 28:16-20

The late Cardinal Cushing tells of an occasion when he was administering last rites to a man who had collapsed in a general store. Following his usual custom, he knelt by the man and asked, “Do you believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit?” The Cardinal said the man roused a bit, opened an eye, looked at him and said, “Here I am, dying, and you ask me a riddle.”

Without doubt the Trinity is a riddle, a puzzle, a mystery. Who here can make sense of the doctrine? According to Matthew 28:19, we baptize in the one name (singular) of the threefold God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit but these three Persons are not three gods. They are One—the one, true, and living God. It baffles the mind, as well it should. For when we talk of the Trinity we find ourselves discussing the very essence of an infinite God. And if we could grasp the essence of the Infinite God with our finite human mind then our mind would be greater than God and He would be less than our mere mortal mind. The very fact that this doctrine baffles me is one reason why I believe in its veracity, its authenticity, its truth. The essence of an Infinite God should be beyond our human comprehension, don’t you think?

Well today is Trinity Sunday. Trinity Sunday is the only day in the Church calendar dedicated solely to a doctrine. That, in and of itself, should tell us something about this doctrine. It is not, as some suggest, an unimportant bit of philosophical speculation regarding the nature of God. It is a distinctive and essential Christian doctrine so important that the Church has set aside one day each year wholly devoted to this one teaching.

Yes, the Trinity is a distinctive Christian doctrine. There are three great monotheistic religions in the world—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. And all of these religions espouse belief in one God. So what’s the difference? Do we all worship the same God under different names? The Jews worship Yahweh. The Muslims worship Allah. And the Christians worship God. But Christians worship one God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Father is God. The Son is God. The Holy Spirit is God. In the words of the Nicene Creed, Christians confess faith in one God, the Father Almighty, and in one Lord Jesus Christ, who is God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, being of one substance with the Father. Furthermore, Christians confess faith in the Holy Ghost who proceedeth from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified. Our Muslim neighbors and Jewish friends do not hold this belief. The doctrine of Trinity is a distinctive Christian doctrine. It sets us apart from every other religion in the world.

But more than this, it is an essential doctrine. If it were a distinctive but non-essential doctrine then it might be best to drop it in the interest of inter-religious harmony. But we can’t drop this doctrine without destroying the Christian faith. This one doctrine is the hinge upon which so many other doctrines hang.

You see if you do away with this doctrine then you have a problem with the Bible because the Bible makes Jesus coequal with God. For example, John 1:1 and 14
speak of Jesus as the Word and say, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” This is not an isolated passage. Titus 2:13 refers to “our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.” There are many other instances of this.

The Bible also makes the Holy Spirit coequal with God. Acts 5:3-4 tells us that we are guilty of lying to God if we lie to the Holy Spirit. So you see, if you do away with this doctrine, the doctrine of the Trinity, then you have a problem with the Bible because the Bible makes both Jesus and the Holy Spirit coequal with God. If you deny the Trinity then the Bible is in error.

And Jesus is in error too. You see Jesus made some outrageous claims for himself. “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me,” he said in Matthew 28:18. How could he have all authority in heaven and on earth unless, of course, he was divine? In John 10:30 he claimed to be one with God. “The Father and I are one,” he said. In John 14:8-9 Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.’” Yes, Jesus made some outrageous claims for himself. Either he was a liar, a lunatic, or the Lord he claimed to be.

John Stott sums it up, “So close was his connection with God that he equated a man’s attitude to himself with the man’s attitude to God. Thus, to know him was to know God (Jn 8:19; 14:7). To see him was to see God (Jn 12:45; 14:9). To believe in him was to believe in God (Jn 12:44; 14:1). To receive him was to receive God (Mk 9:37). To hate him was to hate God (Jn 15:23). And to honor him was to honor God (Jn 15:23).” (Know Why You Believe by Paul E. Little, p. 41) If you deny the Trinity then Jesus was in error in the claims he made for himself. He was either a liar, a lunatic, or the Lord he claimed to be.

Then again, if you deny the Trinity you undermine the Christian message of salvation. The Christian message of salvation is really rather simple. The Bible says, all have sinned and come short of the glory of God and the penalty of sin is death. But Jesus died for our sin according to the Scriptures. In other words, he paid the price for our sin. He suffered the penalty for our sin in our place as our substitute. Because he paid the price, we don’t have to. If we put our faith in him then we won’t be punished for our sin. We’ll be forgiven and given everlasting life in place of eternal death. (See Romans 3:23, 6:23, 1 Corinthians 15:3, John 3:16-18, 36)

Now all of this begs the question: How can the death of one person pay the price for all people? It couldn’t unless that person was more than just an ordinary man. Paul Little says, “The effectiveness of the death of Christ depends on who died. This was no mere man. Jesus Christ was the God-man: ‘God was in Christ’ (2 Cor. 5:19). Christ’s life was of infinite value, and His death likewise had infinite worth.”

If you take away the Trinity, if you make Jesus something less than the Son of God in human flesh, then you strike a mortal blow to the Christian message of salvation! So you see, this doctrine is not only a distinctive doctrine it is an essential doctrine too. Drop the doctrine and you destroy the faith!
But even if we say, as I have said, that this doctrine is both a distinctive and an essential Christian doctrine, what difference does it make in daily living? It makes a great deal of difference in the way we live. In James Mitchner's book “The Source,” there’s a touching scene where a woman watches her husband as he leaves home to worship at a pagan Temple. She knows he is going there to have sex with a Temple prostitute because he believes that ritual sex will produce fertility in the land. You can imagine how she feels as her husband walks away. Her heart is breaking in her and she says to herself, “He would be a different man if he had a different god.”

Practically speaking, we tend to become like the God we worship. As Christians, we worship a God who is a community in unity. We worship a God who is three Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—all living in the loving harmony of the one great Godhead. As a consequence, when we worship God we become like God. We become a community of unity and love. We become the Church—the people of God—people who love one another and the world.

In 2 Corinthians 13:11-13 we see a clear connection between the triune nature of God and the loving nature of his Church. First comes the call to live a life of love. “Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell...agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss.” Then comes the Trinitarian benediction. “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.”

You see we worship one God and this God is the gracious Christ, the loving Father, the friendly Spirit. Because we worship the gracious Christ, the loving Father, the friendly Spirit, we should be gracious, loving, and friendly to all. We should agree with one another, live in peace, and greet one another with holy affection. We should become like the God we serve. And we will become like him as we worship him in his Trinity.

Let me close with a rather ordinary illustration. Will Willimon wrote the following in one of his sermons. “Sometime ago I was at a church conference where we were discussing ministry with people living with AIDS. An AIDS activist spoke for about an hour, an hour-long tirade of invectives against the church. He castigated the church for our conservatism, our backwardness, our fear and our inactivity in the AIDS crisis. When he finally finished, he asked if there were any questions. Of course, none of us would have been dumb enough to say anything, because we didn’t want to be the object of more criticism.

“An older woman came to the microphone. She said, ‘I am a member of the women's Wednesday morning Bible study group at my church. Most of us have been there for the last 20 years, the same women, studying the Bible, week after week. One week...one of the women came and told us that she had met a young man in her apartment building who was dying of AIDS. The young man had been forsaken by his family. He had no one. She had been visiting him, doing some light cleaning around his apartment, running errands when he was too ill to go out, and being whatever help she could. A lot of these people don’t have grandparents close.

“That’s where we came in. We realized that Jesus was calling us to be representative grandmothers for people suffering with this illness. Thereafter, each of us adopted
someone with AIDS and now serve as that person's grandmother. It's a little thing, ordinary, but it is something we could do."

My friends, that's what happens to us when we worship the Triune God. That's what happens to us when we worship the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That's what happens to us when we worship the God who is a Community in unity—the blessed Trinity. As we worship this God we become like this God. We become a community of unity and love. We become the Church—the people of God—a people who love one another and the world. Thanks be unto the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.