

Religion, or Relationships?

[Text Matthew 28:16-20]

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A minister is driving across a bridge one night, when he spots a man standing on the railing, poised to jump. "Don't do it!" the minister says. "Why shouldn't I?" the man replies. "Well, there's so much to live for!" "Like what?" "Well, are you religious?" "Yes I am." "Me too" the minister says, "Are you a Christian?" "Yes I am." "Protestant or Catholic?" "Protestant." "So am I" the minister replies. "What denomination are you?" "Baptist" the man says. "So am I!" says the minister, smiling. "Are you American Baptist or Southern Baptist?" The man replies, "American Baptist." "I see" says the minister, getting back in his car, "Well, Have a nice swim, you heretic!"

O.K....I'll admit I'm a bit biased; but in my experience, people who are insistent about the absolute correctness of their particular religion, often fall short when it come to showing the kind of compassion that is at the heart of every major faith tradition. I also find that the most genuine followers of Jesus Christ are more concerned about the way they treat the people around them, than about trying to convince those people about the correctness of their religious doctrines. Having said this, I must also acknowledge that the Doctrine of the Holy Trinity can actually provide some helpful insight on how you and I can relate more compassionately to other people.

The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity was an attempt by early Christians to explain the mystery of the intricate and intimate relationship between the Holy One who creates Life, the Christ who embodies Life's fulness, and the Holy Spirit who continues to inspire our daily living. So essentially, the Holy Trinity isn't so much a theological construct to be explained and defended, but rather a marvelous *relationship* to be explored and experienced.

This Doctrine reminds us that it is only through our loving relationships, that you and I can truly embrace the Holy One; because

it is within a multifaceted *relationship* that the Holy One lives and moves and embraces us all. So today we highlight the Holy Trinity, not because we cling to a particular *doctrine*, but because we value the importance of *relationships*. And within this loving and inclusive Family of Faith, you and I strive to welcome and embrace *all* people - especially those whose relationship with the Church may be fractured because of their sincere doubts or questions; their personal struggles or their perceived differences.

In this morning's New Testament reading, the Risen Christ is joined by his disciples on a Galilean mountainside. When they see Jesus, 'they worship him; but some *doubted!*' Matthew's Gospel account doesn't conclude with a perfectly unified Community of Faith; with everyone possessing the same neat and tidy theology. Nor does Jesus tell his followers to "Go and *convert* people of all nations; making sure that they all profess the same creeds and doctrines!" No, Jesus calls his disciples to "make disciples": to teach, encourage and inspire other people to live as Jesus did. And what better way to do this, then to welcome, love and care for others, just like Jesus does.

Throughout my life, I've known many highly religious individuals, whose primary focus is to get other people to think and talk, believe and act exactly as they themselves do. They claim it's because they're concerned about "saving" those people; yet there's little in their attitude, their demeanor, or their actions to back that up. Thirty years ago, when I acknowledged to myself and to others that I'm gay, the cruelest comments and the most devastating condemnation came from church members - and family members - who claim to have the most pure and correct religious understanding. Fortunately for me, there were others who - though not as absolutely certain in their *religion* - were tremendously compassionate in their *response*. And their open acceptance of my authentic self, opened-up wonderful opportunities for more genuine and lasting friendships. And with their encouragement, I was able to eventually find my way back to pastoral ministry in the United Church of Christ.

The United Church of Christ has no set creeds or formulas that serve as a test of one's Faith, because we recognize that each person's understanding of the transcendent Holy One will probably vary in its substance and expression. And while our denomination does value the Church's historic creeds and doctrines, we also value the on-going insights and interpretations that each person can discover and articulate for him or her self. So on this Holy Trinity Sunday, while it's quite appropriate to talk about the Holy Trinity, our goal isn't to explain and defend a *doctrine*, but rather to celebrate the Divine *Relationships* which that doctrine expresses and inspires.

In the Holy Trinity, we can envision the Holy One as a Loving Creator - the Source of Life who not only starts the process, but who continues to sustain and care for the complete cosmos - at every moment in time. Then, at one particular moment in time, Jesus the Christ - the Anointed One - comes to embody that Divine compassion and care. Jesus lives his life as a True Child of the Holy One, and he sees in each person he encounters, that same Divine Presence and potential. He welcomes *all* to the table - to break bread and to share community. For Jesus, there are no "outsiders" to the Divine Realm. In fact, he makes it his top priority to welcome those who society and religion consider outcasts - to include those who would otherwise be excluded.

In every situation, Jesus insists on doing the loving and caring thing, because that is his *nature* - his Divine nature! And even when Jesus' insistence that all be welcomed and included, leads to his own rejection and condemnation, he continues to trust that the Eternal Spirit of Compassion and Grace will prevail. The message of Easter is that even when the worst happens, even in the presence of death itself, the stronger Presence of Divine Life and Love ultimately triumphs! And when the time comes for Jesus to leave this time and space, the Life and Love of the Holy One continues to work and act, in and through the abiding Presence of the Holy Spirit - the Spirit of Love, which transcends religion, breaks-down barriers, and unites all humanity into one caring and compassionate family .

Today we celebrate the Holy Trinity, not because we cling to a particular *doctrine*, but because we value the importance of *relationships*. And as a loving, inclusive Family of Faith, we seek to put people first. We strive to be a community where all are welcomed and embraced - especially those who bring their questions and doubts, their fears and struggles, their marvelous differences and distinct personalities. After all, in any good relationship there's always room for diversity and growth, challenges and changes, and - most of all - greater compassion, openness, and love!