

Doctrines, Doubts, and Disciples

[Text -Matthew 28:16-20]

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In the fifth-century, the “Church Fathers” established a new *Creed* [or Statement of Faith] that was intended to help clarify the Church’s Doctrine of the Holy Trinity. This Creed was named after Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria, who in the year 325, vigorously defended the Doctrine of the Holy Trinity at the Council of Nicea [where the *Nicene Creed* was formulated]. Like the *Nicene Creed*, the *Athanasian Creed* is still accepted by Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, and other Protestant denominations. So on this Trinity Sunday, I think it’s fitting to share some brief excerpts from this rather lengthy creed:

It begins, “Whoever wants to be saved should think thus about the Trinity....We worship one God in Trinity and the Trinity in unity, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the divine Essence. For the Father is one person, the Son is another, and the Holy Spirit is still another. But the deity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is One, equal in glory and coequal in majesty....The Father is eternal; the Son is eternal; and the Holy Spirit is eternal. And yet they are not three eternals; but one eternal....And in this Trinity, no One is before or after, greater or less than the other; but all three persons are in themselves, coeternal and coequal....One cannot be saved without believing this firmly and faithfully.” [Believing it? How about just *understanding* it!]

Although this creed was written to clarify an important facet of the Christian Faith, the expectation by those who authored it - that *all* Christians “firmly and faithfully” believe the exact same thing - is incompatible with the Faith itself. The word “creed” comes from the Latin word *credo*, which means “*I believe*”. Therefore, a creed, in its truest sense, should be a personal *testimony* of one’s faith.

However, in the desire to rigidly define and regulate the “True Faith”, the Church Fathers develop creeds and doctrines to be used as strict *tests* of faith - to determine who will be saved, and who is bound for eternal damnation. [Maybe we should have listened to the Church Mothers!]

In the United Church of Christ, there are no set creeds or formulas that serve as a test of our Faith. That’s because we recognize that each person’s understanding of the transcendent Holy One will probably vary in substance, and in expression. So while our denomination does value the Church’s historic creeds and doctrines, we also value the *continuing* insights and interpretations that each person discovers and articulates for him or her self. For while it may make us feel secure [or superior] to think that we have grasped the true nature the Divine Source of this vast Cosmos, that kind of arrogant certainty is often challenged by the very Scriptural passages upon which it is based.

Jesus gathers an inner circle of twelve disciples, as a way of representing his deep connection to the twelve tribes of Israel; yet that circle is fractured and flawed. Judas is gone, so now only eleven disciples remain to join Jesus on the 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 and encourage and inspire other people to live as Jesus did. And the truly effective way to do this, is for us to live and love, give and forgive, care for and welcome 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 care about "saving" those people; yet there's little in their demeanor or attitude or actions to back that up. Twenty-eight years ago, when I finally acknowledged to myself and to others that I'm gay, the cruelest comments and most devastating condemnation came from the church leaders and members - and my family members - who claimed to have the most pure and correct religious understanding. Fortunately for me however, there were others who - though not as absolutely certain in their *religion* - were tremendously compassionate in their *response*. And rather than fracturing our friendships, this more open and complete sharing of my authentic self, opened-up wonderful opportunities for more genuine and substantial relationships.

I'll admit that I'm biased, but in my experience the truest followers of Jesus are rarely revealed by the purity of their religious doctrine; they are made-known through their caring and compassionate *relationships*. And, strangely enough, this is where the Doctrine of the Holy Trinity may actually prove helpful for you and me today. This Doctrine 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 the fulness of that Life, and the Holy Spirit who continues to inspire our daily living. In this regard, the Holy Trinity isn't a theological construct to be explained, but rather a marvelous and mystical relationship to be explored and experienced and joyfully celebrated!

Perhaps the greatest gift of the Doctrine of the Holy Trinity, is that it reminds us that it is only through our loving relationships, that we can truly embrace the Holy One; because it's within a multifaceted *relationship* that the Holy One lives and moves and embraces us all. So today we celebrate 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, we strive to welcome and accept *all* people - especially those who bring their honest doubts and questions, uncertainty and struggles. Because, while “thinking rightly” about the Holy Trinity may, or may not, “save” us - *living* in right and honest relationship with the Holy One - and with one another - will certainly keep us moving in the right direction.