



# DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

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## "THE TRINITY: GOD'S UNPROFESSIONAL NEARNESS"

Trinity Sunday

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Deuteronomy 4:32-40, Matthew 28:16-20

"Did any people ever hear the voice of a god speaking out of the midst of a fire as you have heard...? Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself? Out of heaven he let you hear his voice,...he let you see his great fire, and you heard his words out of the midst of the fire... because he loved your fathers and chose their descendants...."

Some professor told me in seminary that distance is an important part of good counseling. A counselor must be close enough to the counselee to care, yet distant enough objectively, dispassionately, to consider, reflect, advise. "Professional Distance," isn't that what they call it?

And I confess that I have never been too good at professional distance. Awhile back a senior came by the office to tell me that he had decided to go to seminary. "I know that you can't tell me what to do, but I would like to hear your opinion about where I ought to go to seminary."

"Of course, I can't tell you. You are of another denomination than my own. You must do what is right for you. I can't tell you what to do. Which seminary did you have in mind?"

He answered, "Union in New York."

"No! No! That's all wrong for you. You wouldn't like it there. You should be going to Princeton Seminary. That's the place for you. Your theology would be better served there."

"Er, uh, I'm glad you can't tell me what to do," he said.

"Look, I flunked Non-Directive Counseling in Seminary," I confessed. I've never been too good at professional distance. I hope the reason is that I care. Distance. Nearness.

At the risk of losing you before the sermon has a chance to begin, I'm going to lay my cards on the table and tell you that this is to be a sermon about the Trinity and therefore about God. I know that the English preacher, Colin Morris, says that any preacher with good sense will call in sick on Trinity Sunday.

The Trinity, the affirmation that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is not a mystery of mathematics: How can one God really equal three? The Trinity is the result of a debate about who God really is. And I'm betting that is why you are here today, even if you don't know it, because you're wondering who God really is and how it stands between us and God.



That was the question of the Hebrew slaves once they broke loose from Pharaoh and were at last free in the wilderness. Free, yes, but also hungry.

“Is the LORD among us or not?” they asked. (Ex.17:7) That, I’m betting is your question. Is the Lord of all the universe among us or not?

A Professor Steinburg from Temple University has, after studying hundreds of teenagers and their parents, developed a theory of “responsive parenting.” Simply put, Dr. Steinburg believes that the single most important key to good parenting of adolescents is the parent’s constant ability, in word and deed, to respond to a child’s behavior and personality. Dr. Steinburg claims that the more loquacious the parent, the more time a parent spends talking to a teenager, the better adjusted the teenager.

This confirms an opinion of my own, namely, that there seems to be some kind of connection between good teaching and constant talking. The best teachers are often the biggest talkers. Take Sandy Cohen, Durham County Teacher of the Year, or, Star Braswell over at Hope Valley Elementary. Visit their classrooms and you will find that, when the bell rings at 8:00 a.m. until it rings again at 2:30, it’s,

“Class, today we are going to study prepositions....That will be enough, John, sit down and get your book....so is this Monday, or something?....Who can tell me about prepositions that I don’t know....Gloria?...John, why are you still walking around?....That’s good Gloria! Somebody else tell me about prepositions....John, anytime you want to sit down it will be just fine with me. We’re only having school here if you don’t mind....”

“Communication is the single most important factor in marriage,” says counselor David Mace. I’d go a step further and say that marriage is communication.

So is faith. As believers we can be glad that our God is, as Deuteronomy says, among all gods, distinguished for his loquaciousness. Israel’s God loves to talk, likes nothing better than, in word and deed, to communicate, commune, speak and thus make community. God likes to get close.

As Paul says, “Faith comes from hearing.” So does the church. If God had not been talkative, we wouldn’t be here. We, the church, are the creation of divine communication, divine closeness.

Come with me to the Fourth Century and let’s listen in on a debate between Athanasius and Arius. Is Jesus the Christ really God or not? That was at the heart of the debate. The Nicene Creed said that Jesus was indeed “begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father....” In other words, Christ was not made out of nothing as we are but he was “begotten,” generated from the very substance of God. When we look at Jesus, we are looking at God. Jesus is God’s full communication of himself. When we look at Jesus, we are seeing as much of God as we ever hope to see because this Jew from Nazareth is “of one Being with the Father.”

This was too much for Arius. He rejected the Creed’s notion that Jesus was fully divine. After all, what makes God, God? asked Arius. God is God because God can never be fully communicated. Divinity is self-contained, fully complete within itself, needing nothing else. Being completely self-sufficient, deity has no need to extend itself or to communicate itself. It is absolute. Arius rejected the notion



that so exalted and self-contained a being as God should directly involve himself with his creatures. To do so would be to dirty the hands of the pure, absolute God, to risk God's being dependent upon or involved with mere creatures.

For Arius, God is more like Roger, the president of General Motors who deals with people only through his receptionist, than like Chrysler's Iacocca, who walks up and down the assembly lines and makes commercials.

A recent American researcher studied the Sony Corporation and found that just by daring to ask to speak to the president of Sony, a vice-president can be fired. Distance.

The Trinity is the result of a debate over distance, nearness. Is Jesus, God, or is he only an intermediary?

For Arius, the Nicene Creed and its delineation of the status of Christ and the Holy Spirit as integral, intimate natures of God was a pagan vulgarization of God. God, the great God on high, is not dependent, derived, divisible, deficient. Who wants a God who is so weak as to need us for anything? "The Son," said Arius, "is not equal to God in any way, but is made out of nothing by God. The Father...is alone God, is completely alien to the Son in essence."

In all of history, there has probably never been so noble, so exalted a depiction of God's supreme otherness, God's holy distance, than that of Arius. His whole concern was to honor God, setting God high, lifted up, above the contingent, conditioned world of his creatures. Distance.

Enter Athanasius who argued, against Arius, that Christ's complete dependency upon God was supreme validation that Jesus was indeed God. Being self-contained, superior, distant is not the essential mark of divinity, said Athanasius.

But we humans tend to bow before independence before we will bow before God. We imagine that God relates to the world in the same way in which we relate to the world. For us humans, our most bitter fate is to be relegated to dependency upon someone else.

"I'm just not ready for marriage. I don't want to be dependent on another. Got to keep my options open."

"Saving for retirement? Yes. We fear being dependent on our children."

"I'll be glad when I get my degree and I can stop being dependent on my old man!"

It is a fearful thing to realize that there is another person who can't keep her distance, who really needs me. More frightening is the realization that I need her. Oh, the comforting distance!

Arius felt that the Nicene Creed had dangerously compromised the notion of a distant, absolute God with its affirmation of Jesus as the Son of God, dependent, generated by, answerable to God. What kind of God needs manifestations of himself in order to be God? What kind of God would lower himself to dirty his hands in human flesh or walk the streets of Nazareth?

If absolute distance, independence is not the decisive mark of divinity, then what is? Here's a clue. The Gospel of John says that everything the Father has, he has given to the Son (16:15). Because the Father loves the Son, he has given all things into his hand (3:35).



What is the decisive mark of God? Self-giving. It is the love by which this God is constantly communicating himself to his beloved Son. Between the Father and the Son there is total and mutual self-giving. So when we look at the Son, we are looking at the Father (John 12:44).

Arius' God is a static deity who tenaciously holds on to his divinity, keeping his distance from the contingent, painful world of humanity. Athanasius' God, the God of the Creed, is a dynamic God eternally engaged in self-giving, self-disclosure, self-communication. The Father holds nothing back from the Son. All the glory that God has got is given to the Son who in turn gives back all glory to the Father.

When Arius charged Athanasius with decimating the divine distance, Athanasius charged Arius' god with being an *agonos theos*, a sterile God who doesn't generate, doesn't shine, doesn't talk or reveal. The close Triune God is always busy relating, communicating, shining. When we look at Jesus we see so much of God because Jesus is totally at one with God. On the other hand, Jesus is constantly turning us toward God because Jesus is busy giving back to God the glory that God has given him. So a symbol for the Trinity is three interlocked circles, showing love coming from and going back constantly. The Trinity is not some mathematical absurdity that  $1 + 1 + 1 = 1$ . The Trinity is a statement about what makes God, God. God's perfection is precisely in God's closeness rather than in his distance, in God's communicativeness rather than God's inscrutable silence.

So Jesus told a story about a father who had two sons. One asked for his inheritance; his father gave it to him. And when the prodigal son had blown his inheritance, the father welcomed him and threw a party. And when the older son pouted because he wanted a party, the father didn't give him a party, he gave him everything (Luke 15). And then there was the one about the man in a ditch who was passed by by all the good, religious people who had to keep their distance. But this Samaritan stopped and -- gave him a quarter to call the Highway Patrol? No. The Samaritan stopped, risked his own life to help, ripped up his Brooks Brothers suit to make bandages, put the bleeding man on the leather seats of his BMW, took him to the hospital, gave the hospital every dime he had to care for the man and promised to come back and pay even more.

See? When this God gets to giving, he doesn't know when to stop. Trinity -- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit -- is our experience of God's communicative extravagance.

We, we are often like Arius. "Our god is distant, high and lifted up, not a god who dirties his hands in our affairs. Our god is exalted, honored, high -- if we have to nail him up there ourselves."

And we did. We nailed him up only to have him say, "And when I am lifted up [surprise!], I will draw everyone to myself."

We offer this God no compliment when we impute to him the same distance through which we encircle our lives. Here is a God who is always willing to stoop, who never stops giving, a God who welcomes, even seeks our prayer and praise, our good deeds and yes, even our sin.

In the fifty-fifth chapter of Isaiah, the prophet hears God say, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways <sup>4</sup> my ways, says the LORD. For as the



heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts" (55:8-9).

And I think: Maybe Arius was right. God really is distant, far. God's ways, God's thoughts are high, up, far, distant. We can't know such a God! How impudent of us little earthlings to presume to know anything, much less talk to and serve such a God!

But please read on: Just as my rain and snow come down to the earth and water your fields, so my word shall come down and accomplish what I want from it, says God. God's greatest "godness" is that God is so little like our idea of who God ought to be. Our God, our Triune, Trinitarian God is unlike us in that he is so close, so self-giving, holds nothing back, extravagantly offers us everything.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.