

Living into Discipleship

Pentecost 1 (Holy Trinity)

Text: Matthew 28:16–20

June 19, 2011 A Mystery to Be Lived, Not a Puzzle a Puzzle to Be Solved

Back in 1992, Gwen Shamblin
created a Christian weight loss program
called *Weigh Down*.

The program grew from a small cottage industry run out of her garage
to a multimillion-dollar corporation that included partnerships
with over 30,000 churches and Christian organizations.

But in 2000, her business was in jeopardy
because of some comments she made
about her beliefs about the Trinity.

*As a ministry, she said,
we believe in
God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit.
However, the Bible does not use the word Trinity,
and our feeling is that the word Trinity
implies equality in leadership, or shared Lordship.*

*It is clear that the scriptures teach
that Jesus is the Son of God
and that God sends the Holy Spirit.
The Holy Spirit
does not send God anywhere.
God is clearly the Head.*

Her comments sent shockwaves
through her network of followers
and business partners.

Her statements about the Trinity precipitated quite a backlash.
Many influential evangelical churches dropped her program.
There was an exodus of key employees.
And Thomas Nelson
canceled the publication of her book
that was scheduled for release the next month.¹

If you are confused as to why her words
got her into so much trouble
that is quite understandable.

For 2000 years, the church has struggled to explain the mystery of the Trinity:
how God can be both one God
and three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
In fact, in the early years of the church, the doctrine of the Trinity
was at the center of several theological controversies
that threatened to tear the church apart.

Where Shamblin went wrong was in her assertion that
 God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit
 are not equal in leadership.

In an interview, she agreed that Jesus was both Lord and God,
 but she maintained that Jesus held a
 secondary and unequal relationship to God.

If that still leaves you confused,
 think about where such a statement
 ultimately ends up?

If what Shamblin says is true—if Jesus is subordinate to God—
 then Jesus is not fully God,
 and that, of course, cuts at the very heart of the church's historic teaching
 that Jesus, in his very nature, is both fully God and fully man.

Shamblin tries to argue her point saying that Christians grieve Jesus
 if they adhere to doctrines
 not found in Scripture.

She says, *If God wanted us to refer to
 Himself, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit as the Trinity,
 he would not have left this word
 completely out of the Bible.*

While Shamblin is correct in saying that the word *Trinity* is not in the Bible,
 we have to be careful when these kinds of claims are made.
 Just because a word is not in the Bible doesn't mean it is unbiblical.

There are a lot of words we use in the church that are not found in the Bible—
sacrament, creed, Eucharist, Holy Communion to name a few.
 In fact, the word *Bible* is not in the Bible.
 Just because *Trinity* is not in the Bible doesn't mean the doctrine is unbiblical.
 The word *Trinity* is simply an attempt to summarize
 how God reveals himself to us in the Bible.

This morning as we celebrate the Festival of the Holy Trinity,
 some, if not all, of us may struggle to understand the doctrine of the Trinity.
 That's not surprising.

John Wesley once said,
*Show me a worm that can comprehend a human being, and then
 I will show you a human being that can comprehend the Triune God.*
 Luther's comment was even more to the point.
*To try to comprehend the Trinity
 endangers your sanity.*

If we are struggling with our faith to grasp the concept of the Trinity, we are not alone.
 There is an ancient story about St. Augustine
 that emphasizes the point.

One day while taking a break from writing about the Trinity,
 he walked along the shore of the Mediterranean Sea
 to clear his mind.

As he strolled along the beach, he came across a little boy with a pail.
 The boy was filling it with water from the sea,
 and dumping it into a hole he had dug in the sand.

As soon as the pail was empty,
 he ran back down to the water
 and did it all over again.

Over and over,
 the little guy ran back and forth between the sea
 and the hole in the sand where he was dumping the water.

Augustine asked him what he was doing.
 He told him he was emptying the sea into the hole.
 Augustine chuckled and tried to point out the futility of the task.

Unfazed, the boy replied,
*I'll empty the sea before you
 understand the Trinity.²*

If you are struggling with the concept of the Trinity
 —if you have doubts about one God in three persons: Father, Son and Spirit—
 know that doubt has always accompanied the proclamation of the gospel.

We are all familiar with the story of *Doubting Thomas*.

There are echoes of his doubt in the scene from Matthew's gospel
 that was just read.

The 11 disciples go to the mountain in Galilee, as directed, and
 when they see Jesus, Matthew tells us,
they worshipped him; but some doubted.

If you have doubts about the Trinity or the risen Christ, take heart.
 Even though the disciples are standing in the presence of the risen Jesus
 seeing him with their own eyes, some of them doubt.

Now if those
 who are standing in the presence of the risen Christ
 have doubts,
 it's not surprising
 that we might have doubts
 from time to time.

The good news for us is that even though some of the disciples doubted,
 Jesus equipped them and gave them the same task
 as those who didn't doubt.

In other words, it is OK to doubt!
 Doubt often leads
 to deeper faith!

Justo Gonzalez, author of the book, *The Story of Christianity*, says,
The Trinity is a mystery, not a puzzle.
You try to solve the puzzle; you stand in awe before a mystery.

In other words, the Trinity
 is a mystery to be lived,
 not a puzzle a puzzle
 to be solved.

In his book *Giving Yourself Away*,
 David Dunn shares an experience that gave him insight
 into the truth about the mystery of the Trinity.

While riding a bus, he noticed that the bus driver was exceptionally cheerful.
 He had a kind and uplifting word for everyone who got on the bus
 and another kind word when they got off at their stops.
 As he was about to get off, Dunn told the driver
 he was the happiest bus driver he had ever seen
 and wondered what made him so cheerful.

To be honest, said the driver,
I read in the paper a few months ago about a man who died
and left a lot of money to a bus driver who was nice to him.
So, I thought maybe I would try it myself.
I've enjoyed myself so much,
now I don't care whether anybody ever leaves me any money.³

What began in the bus driver's head found its way to his heart,
 and when it found its place in his heart, it became real.
 The doctrine of the Trinity is like that.

If we want to know God, we can't fully know him with our mind.
 To know God, there must come that point
 when the love and power of God become real in our hearts.
 Until we get to that point,
 we will never *truly know* God—
 no matter how much we *know about* God.

The word *Trinity* in and of itself
 doesn't tell us much at all
 about God.

But, if we move beyond the word
 to the reality of how we come to know God
 in the experiences of his love as Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
 then the word *Trinity*
 will tell us everything about God
 we will ever need to know.



¹ Brett Blair and Brent Porterfield, ChristianGlobe, Inc.. www.sermons.com, downloaded 5-18-11.

² Michael Green, *The Puzzling Trinity*. www.sermons.com, downloaded 5-18-11.

³ Paul van Dine, *Not the Nature, But the Character of God—Trinity!* Cathedral Publishers. www.sermons.com, downloaded 5-18-11.