

Date: June 3, 2007

SUNDAY: Trinity

SERMON: Checking Our Maps

Texts: Romans 4:20 - 5:5; John 16:12-17

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The other night, Carol and I rented the movie “Vatel,” directed by Roland Joffe and starring Gerard Depardieu. It’s the story of the man who was the “master of pleasures and festivities” under the Prince Condé at the Chateau at Chantilly during the reign of Louis XIV. (If you ever wanted to know why France had a revolution, watch that movie.)

Although the whole story supposedly takes place at Chantilly, the film-makers shot many of the scenes at a variety of other chateaus around Paris, which keeps anyone who has visited some of those chateaus guessing. At one point, I recognized a shot of the gardens at Fontainebleau. That glimpse sparked a memory of one of my favorite rooms in that royal house. In the grand salon at Fontainebleau, on one wall, there is an old map of Paris dating from the 1400’s. It’s actually painted in oils, and is probably at least twenty feet long and about 10 feet high.

As maps go, it was pretty accurate. The river Seine was fairly depicted with its bends right where they are, even though the painter didn’t have access to satellite photographs. It was easy to figure out where our church and apartment were, and where the Eiffel tower now stands, and especially where Notre Dame stands on its island in the Seine, since it was there when the map was made. But grassy fields and forest still covered most of what is modern-day Paris, including the part that is now the Champs-Elysees and the Boulevard St. Germain.

It’s fun to look at old maps, isn’t it? But as much fun as it was comparing that old map of Paris at Fontainebleau with the city as it exists today, it wouldn’t be much help to tourists trying to find their way to the Louvre or the Arc d’Triomphe. For that, the current Michelin street map—the little blue book that everyone in Paris

has and relies on, is much more useful.

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity is the Christian church’s map of its understanding of, and its relationship to, the God of Israel. It took about four hundred years of reflection and debate on that relationship to get to the point where the church could frame its understanding in language that was intelligible to itself, if not always to those outside the Christian community. Those statements are found principally in the two classical creeds that have come down to us from that period—the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed. Those ancient creeds are a little like that old map on the wall of the grand salon at Fontainebleau. It’s certainly an accurate map for its time, and still is even today, in depicting the way Paris was 700 years ago. But just as that old map is not particularly useful for modern residents or tourists in Paris, so the old creeds are not always particularly useful in helping us chart the path of our relationship with this same God.

So why set aside one Sunday a year to think about this uniquely Christian understanding of God? The doctrine of the Trinity is hardly something that makes up the stuff of our everyday conversation, is it? Yet, in a day when competing understandings of God are at the root of many of the conflicts in the world, and specifically, at the root of the our current experience with the terrorism fostered by particular strains within the larger religious tradition of Islam, the question of how we understand the God we worship is every bit as urgent a question as it was for those first-century Jews who claimed that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ or Messiah who revealed things about God that they had not understood before.

The confession of Jesus as Messiah or Anointed One, is what ultimately produced the first-century split that set the Jesus movement on a linked, but separate path from the rest of Jewish religion. The Jesus movement that developed into what we now call Christianity remains linked to present-day Judaism by common scriptures, common religious stories, linked by a faith in a common God—the God of Abraham, the God of

Moses, the God of the prophets, the God of Jesus of Nazareth. But the two faiths have walked separate paths because of different understandings of their common God and how God is in relationship to the world. Those understandings, based on the experiences of Jesus' earliest followers, also gave the Christian movement a universal appeal that simply could not remain confined within the ethnic and cultural world of Jewish religion. Even by the second-century, the Christian movement was predominantly made up of non-Jewish, Greek-speaking citizens of the Roman empire, and this inevitably led to re-drawing of their maps of God.

This phenomenon was largely due to the way the earliest Jewish followers of Jesus read their old maps of God. After Jesus' death, they went back to their scriptures— their religious maps that they'd always navigated by— and now they read them again through new eyes, through new lenses. Their experiences with Jesus had changed the way they understood those old texts, and inevitably, the way they understood and described their relationship to the God of Israel.

The first one to do this, or at least the first one who has left us any record, was St. Paul. Paul could hardly be said to be a Trinitarian in the sense that the fourth-century framers of the Nicene Creed were. When Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, roughly thirty years after the death of Jesus, Christianity was still very much a minor sect of Judaism, but was beginning already to attract adherents from the wider Hellenistic-Roman world. In this letter, Paul wrestles with a question that had often been thought about before, but which was forcing itself upon the followers of Jesus in his day: was the God of Israel also the God of the other peoples of the world? Did God's covenant with Abraham, which extended to his genealogical descendants, also extend to those who were not descended biologically from Abraham?

His answer, which is an unqualified "yes," is rooted in his own experience of having

had a vision of Jesus alive after his death, and in that vision, heard the risen Christ call him to preach God's saving love to the gentiles.

The heart of Paul's "call" as he terms it, was that the one God, the God of Israel, had sent a Messiah in the person of a particular man, Jesus of Nazareth, whose appearance would usher in a new age of justice and peace. So far, that notion was not unique to Paul, but one of several currents within Jewish religion at that time. However, Paul's claim didn't stop there. For him, the Messiah was not just for Israel, but for the whole world. That claim was nothing short of revolutionary. Just as the community of Israel was constituted by the faith of Abraham, as they followed Abraham in that faith, so now both Jews like Paul and anyone else who puts their trust in this God are constituted as a new covenant community as they follow the faith of Jesus the Messiah. This was the new map of God's dealings with humanity that Paul drew for his time, a map that both affirmed and expanded the understanding of God that he had received from his Jewish heritage. This was the conviction that would drive Paul on his tireless missionary journeys and ultimately change the shape of the world. God's nature as a God of saving love for the whole world was revealed in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and as a result, a new humanity was coming into being because of the faithfulness of Jesus.

So in our passage this morning, after having painstakingly argued his case for the full inclusion of the gentiles among the people of God, Paul says, "*Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; so, let us boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God, and let us boast also in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint, because God's love has been poured*

into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”

We may not have here a well-articulated doctrine of the Trinity framed in the language of Hellenistic philosophy, as it would come to be four centuries later, but what we do have is a very real, useful, and experientially true map that is decidedly trinitarian in shape, a map that arises out of a living experience of God. It is the eternal God, “maker of all things, visible and invisible,” with whom we are reconciled and have peace. All this has come about as a result of God’s own action in and through and with Jesus of Nazareth, God’s Anointed One, so that it is through Jesus the Messiah that we enter into this state of reconciliation or peace with God. And because we have peace, we also have hope, a hope that is made real to us by God’s Holy Spirit, the Spirit that makes God’s presence real when faithful people are gathered together in a community of worship and mission.

The important thing to remember about the doctrine of the Trinity that evolved from these roots, is that it has never been an intellectual solution to an abstract question: it is a description of a real-life solution arrived at by real people as they attempted to understand their own experience of God.

Ruth Duck, a theologian within our own United Church of Christ, and a professor of worship at Garrett Evangelical Seminary at Northwestern, puts it well, I think.

When understood as reflection on Christian faith and history, trinitarian confession is not a relic from the past but a central aspect of Christian identity. The phrase "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" points to the reality of God with us. Although other terms may be used to witness to this reality, revelation has a threefold structure. The doctrine of the Trinity affirms that Christians have come to know God through the Holy One made known to Israel; through the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; and through the Spirit who creates and renews the

church and the world. Without affirming what the Trinity has affirmed, Christianity loses its identity and its history. For God (who is one) has really come to us as the Holy One of Israel, as Jesus Christ and as Spirit. (The Christian Century, May 19-26, 1993, pp. 553-556; the article may be found at www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=314.)

Just because the Trinity is the living God with whom we are in relationship, we are not locked into the language in which the understanding of God was expressed 1500 and more years ago in the classic creeds. We are free to draw new lines on the map, to use new metaphors or language in which to express our own living experience with God. Our new lines are still lines on the old maps, however. The map we call the doctrine of the Trinity is what distinguishes our faith community’s journey through time. It still communicates something true and real that we still need and will always need. It keeps us in touch with our origins and provides a baseline for drawing new lines on our copies of the map. What we cannot do, if we are to stay in living relationship to the God of Abraham and Sarah, to the God of Isaiah and Jeremiah and Jesus and Paul, is to abandon the truth they came to discern about this God. As they struggled to comprehend and learn and grow and speak intelligibly, so must we continue to learn and grow and speak about God in ways that are meaningful and true. And most of all, we need to recognize that, like Paul, we are called to celebrate and bear faithful witness to the truth of a God whose creative and re-creative love and mercy is so high and wide and deep that it includes the whole world, includes even us.