

## **Sermon: The Miseducation of Owl**

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**Scripture: Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; John 16:12-15**

Today is Trinity Sunday, the day on our Christian calendar when we turn special focus on the mystery of the Trinity. The problem with this, of course, is that the concept of the Trinity is perhaps the most complex and difficult doctrinal statement to try to talk about. There's a popular meme shared among clergy on this day that shows a photo of a cute, cuddly kitten and says, "How not to commit heresy on Trinity Sunday: say nothing and show pictures of cats instead."

The doctrine of the Trinity arose not from scripture, itself, as you will find it explicitly spelled out anywhere in here, but rather out of the early church's reflection on scripture, Jesus, and the Spirit. In other words, this is a retrospective belief of most sects of Christianity that some of the greatest thinkers in Christian history couldn't fully grasp. To speak of a God who is three-in-one without entering into various declared heresies in the church is nearly impossible. God, in this view, is both Three and one. Not three separate Gods (that leaves out the -une part of Triune. Not just One, because that misses the Tri- part and the ways in which we encounter God in Jesus and the Spirit. God is not Three. Not just One, but Three *and* One.

Each year as I sit down to write a Trinity Sunday sermon, I meditate on the mystery of the Trinity and seek to understand it better, and I remember all the ways in which the Trinity has been described to me, sometimes poorly, by those I've learned from. In one iteration of the description that even I have used with kids, it to hold up the three-leaf shamrock and say that each leaf represents one member of the Godhead and the entire shamrock

represents the Trinity. That seems like a nice way to shape it and is helpful in some ways, but the church declared this to be the heresy of partialism—declaring, in this case, that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are each 1/3 of God.

We could talk about God as a single “person” who has revealed godself in three different ways, In the Old Testament as God, the “Father,” in the Gospels as the Son, Jesus Christ, and after the ascension as The Holy Spirit. So we’d say that the three persons of the trinity are different “modes” of God. And that sounds fine, but this, too, is a heresy declared by the church as “modalism” because it basically says that the three “persons” of the Trinity do not exist at the same time, thus denying the unity of the Trinity.

There are several other identified heresies about the Trinity, I’ll stop there and just say, you see how easy it is for us to slip into heresy when talking about the Trinity. It would be easier just to talk about cats, wouldn’t it? We will be wise and avoid preaching heresy from this pulpit today.

And speaking of wisdom, well, our scriptures have a lot to say about that today. When we think of wisdom, we might link that to the wisest animal in the animal kingdom, the wise old owl. And who in the western world can think of a wise old owl without thinking of Owl, from A.A. Milne’s Winnie the Pooh? When my boys were younger, we watched Christopher Robbin and the gang a LOT, especially the film from the image on the screen, which is 2011’s Winnie the Pooh.

Like many who fancy themselves wise, Owl likes to hear himself talk and he believes that yes, he is right. Also like many who believe themselves to be wise, Owl often gets it wrong and finds a way to explain away his wrongness whenever necessary. He is clever, after all. In the film, the Pooh, Tigger, Piglet, and the others find a note from their friend, Christopher Robbin which seems to be referencing something called, "The Bakson." Owl, who has clearly knows nothing about the Bakson, immediately assumes the position of expert in all things Backson and, after a brief recitation from his imagination on what kind of creature would take dear, young Christopher Robbin, he gins up the gang, getting them worked up into a frenzy until they have designed the scariest monster imaginable.

After that, they set out to try and find their friend getting themselves into all sorts of calamitous trouble along the way. In the course of time, Christopher Robbin does come back to them, safe and sound. They find out that, in his little boy handwriting, he couldn't spell what he wanted to say perfectly and thus it becomes clear that Bakson is really "Back Soon." And that's when they all turn to look at Owl who, to avoid the scrutiny sure to follow, flies away until things have blown over. The miseducation of Owl is, here, on full display and we realize quite quickly that just because someone fancies himself wise, does not make it so. One thing this story and others like it teach us is that we should not mistake intelligence for wisdom. Intellect and wisdom are not one-in-the-same.

As defined by the dictionary, wisdom is "the quality of having experience, knowledge, and good judgement." Intelligence, on the other hand, can be a component of wisdom, but having intelligence, alone, is not at all what we think of when we think of someone who is wise: someone who uses their

experience and knowledge together and is able to make sound judgement. Now, this might make us think that the older you are, the wiser you are. And there's some truth in that. But I can tell you, I've met some wise sixteen-year-olds and some not-so-wise 60-year-olds. Age helps because with age comes experience, but age is not a guarantee of great wisdom.

In Proverbs 8, we are given a beautiful personification of wisdom, which, I must point out, has the pronoun "she." Ahem. "Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice. On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand... at entrance of the portals" of the city's economic and civic life. Wisdom, in these verses, declares herself to have been present "before the beginning of the earth" through the creation of all things. Wisdom tells us she was beside God throughout all of this, "like a master worker" who rejoiced not just in God's created world, but also delighted in the human race. Wisdom is not new, in other words, and is forged over eons.

It is always problematic to cast Trinitarian and other doctrinal understandings on scriptures that weren't written when these ideas were coming to fruition, and it strains credulity to believe these earlier scriptures from Proverbs or even our gospel reading from John would have had any inkling of Trinitarian thought. We can, however, use those scriptures to illuminate our understanding. They can shine a light, in other words, on the newer thoughts and texts in a way that helps us gain a much richer and deeper understanding—this is what the early church fathers did as they reflected throughout time on the scriptures in the light of their own experiences. This is how Christian theology comes about. The Trinitarian doctrine did not exist really before Tertullian in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century of the

common era. He was born over 150 years after Jesus. Over the centuries, wisdom has been gleaned from experience and study of scripture and, thus, doctrine developed. It wasn't until 325 that the doctrine was finalized and even today, we can't fully understand it. But these doctrines followed Jesus, they did not precede him. So when we, as the church, get hung up on someone getting a particular doctrine wrong, we must remember that these so-called heresies were not declared so by the Triune God, but rather by councils of men from very particular backgrounds with very particular life experiences that differ so very widely from our own.

And, I hope I'm not the first person to mention this to you, but human beings are infinitely fallible. We all get it wrong sometimes. It's possible that these men who lived thousands of years ago did not know exactly how these doctrines would be used over time to both grow the church and cause immense suffering and pain. You all know I'm the most amateur of amateur British historians, and that history is littered with religious strife and countless mass murders perpetrated in the name of God. And that's why I will say to you that, when you have a question about church doctrine or about the wisdom of some of the things you have been taught or have heard from other Christians, just stop. Stop and ask yourself two questions:

1. What did Jesus have to say or what did Jesus do about this thing?
2. What is the most loving response or belief here?

I tell you to do this because we see time after time that God in Jesus Christ is chiefly concerned with love. Loving God, first, of course. And loving others second. If your belief doesn't propel you to do those two things, your belief needs to be reconsidered. If something doesn't align with love of God and love of others... it's probably missed the point. Because the all of our

work is only as good as that which bears witness to the love of God in the world. People who designed these doctrines are not God. The early church fathers weren't God. The president of any denomination isn't God. The pope isn't God. The Apostle Paul is. Not. God. Nor were James or John, Matthew, Mark, or Luke. Abraham wasn't God. King David wasn't. None of these human biblical figures, except for Jesus the Christ are God. Your pastor isn't God. And you know what else isn't God? This beautiful, faithful collection of recorded texts from centuries ago: the Bible. There is so much wisdom in here, so much to learn and interpret, but even with all of that wisdom and truth, we need to remember that the Bible is not part of that three-in-one God we've been talking about. It is not infallible. It is not inerrant. It is timeless wisdom and holy, but it is not God.

And these are things we need to remember as we continue to make sense of our faith in a changing and shifting world. We, the church as a whole, need to remember this as we design our programs and do what we can to facilitate church growth. As we consider how we will be faithful to the gospel according to Jesus Christ, faithful in covenantal relationship with God, with one another, and with our community, as we decide how we will live our faith empowered by the Spirit as a public witness to the love of God found in Christ Jesus. Like the church, Owl had a lot of knowledge, but all the knowledge in the world couldn't make him wise. Not all the time. Not even wise enough to stop and think before assuming, for instance, that "bakson" may be nothing more than "Back soon." The gang end up in a whole lot of trouble all because he wasn't willing to admit he didn't know what the note said.

And this brings me to my primary point today: A large part of my job is words. I read a lot. I write a lot. And, for someone who in life is so generally quiet and introverted, I talk a lot. And yet, one thing you learn in seminary is that you won't always have the words. When I went through Clinical Pastoral Education in a retirement community which offered care to people who needed little and others who needed much, I worried that I wouldn't have the words, which was when my supervisor said to me, "Jessica, you don't need to have any words, just ears." Jesus many times remarks in the importance of listening, Let those who have ears to hear... he says, And that's because, sometimes, the wisest thing we can do is to listen. To admit that we don't know what we don't know. To accept that some things, especially in our religious understanding or in the absolute chaos that is life, are too enigmatic, too complex, too mystical to fully grasp. Sometimes we make things much more complicated than they need to be.

All the religious doctrine in the world is not as important as is the message taught through the life, ministry, and teachings of Jesus. He wasn't concerned with us being able to make sense of the Trinity—as evidenced by the complete lack of any overt mention—he wasn't concerned with who was gay or straight, black or white, young or old—only that they were seen and cared for. What he was concerned with was *the human condition*, the individual, the beloved creation of God. He was concerned with right relationship with God and with others. He was concerned with how we treated one another and how we loved. The most important commandment could have been anything, but Jesus said it was *love*. And sometimes, the most loving, wisest thing we can do is say, "I don't know." I don't know all the answers, but I will sit with you while you try to make sense of what's

happening. So much trouble would have been saved by the Hundred Acre Wood gang if Owl had just simple said, "I don't know what that note says, let's figure it out together." Assuming we have all the answers can get us into a lot of trouble. So on this Trinity Sunday, let us be wiser than old Owl. Let us sit with the mystery of the Trinity. Let us admit we can't explain all the complex ways in which the Three-in-One God is working. Let us, just for today, simply bask in the love and grace of the One who created, guides, and loves us. Amen.