

# SERMON: Trinity Sunday, Year C

**Romans 5:1-5**

Preached Sunday, May 30, 2010 at St. Philip's, Brevard by RDF

How do we know when something is or isn't the "Real McCoy"?

Some of you probably remember the old TV game show, "To Tell the Truth." A panel of celebrities posed questions to the contestants. All four of them claimed to be the same actual person — usually someone whose life was distinctive in some way. If I were on the show, I would begin by saying "Hello, my name is Rob Field." The other three contestants' would introduce themselves in exactly the same way, and their challenge would be to impersonate me so convincingly as to persuade the celebrities that they were me. The drama came at the end of the show, after the celebrities had asked questions and cast their votes. The host would then ask, "Will the real [so-and-so] please stand up!" And finally, everyone would know who was the genuine article.

Today is Trinity Sunday. We live in a world that recognizes many deities and many gods. But as Christians, we believe in the one God whose nature is One in Three and Three in One; Father, Son and Holy Spirit; Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier.

Back when the New Testament was written, there was a lively debate about which god — or which conception of God — was the Real McCoy. Was it a pantheon of many gods, as the pagans believed, with a "chief god" like Zeus? Was it the God of Israel — the one God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob; Rachel, Rebekkah and Sarah? Was it the God who became flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth? And, most importantly for Jews and Christians, could the God of Israel and the God of Jesus Christ be one and the same? These debates and discussions caused many people to wonder — in so many words — "Will the real Yahweh, the real Creator of heaven and earth, please stand up!?"

Now, you've heard the sermons on Trinity Sunday that take pains to articulate the classic definition of the triune God. I've listened to those sermons, I've preached those sermons, and I've been in the pew and nearly fallen asleep to those sermons. If that's what you're looking for, you can look at the Creed of St. Athanasius in the back of the prayer book and probably find what you need. But that's not what I'm after today. This morning, I want to communicate to you what I think it means that we worship a God who is a unity of Three and trinity of One. I want to describe the "so what?" of saying we believe in a God who is majestic and mysterious, yet dynamically alive and closer to us than our own breathing.

But first, here's a Trinity Sunday joke for you. One weekend an American family had a visit from some friends. These friends lived in India and spoke English as a second language. Since their visit fell on a Sunday, the friends came to church with their hosts. And during lunch afterwards, the American family asked their friends' 11 year-old daughter what she thought of church. "I don't understand why the West Coast isn't included," she replied. Perplexed and confused, they asked her what she meant. And she said, "You know, when they talked about God, it was in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the whole East Coast."\*

OK, where was I? Here are four implications of believing in the God who is One in Three and Three in One:

The first meaning of the Trinity is that Christianity has not settled for a deity who can easily be described, pigeon-holed or ignored. Our God is awesome and mysterious because the Holy One for us is dynamic: intimate and close at hand; yet transcendent and beyond our grasp. John Chrysostom once said, "a comprehended god is no god." Anglican writer Evelyn Underhill said, "If God were small enough to be understood He would not be big enough to be worshipped."\*\* The reason there is a tradition called Unitarianism is that some folks could not accept the seeming irrationality of Trinitarianism. And let's grant them this much: if the most important thing for you is a rationally comprehensible god, then the Christian God is not going to add up. A triune deity who is both immanent and transcendent is not going to add up. If this is your frame of mind, Father, Son and Holy Spirit simply cannot be the Real McCoy.

The second meaning of the Trinity is that the God we believe in is relational, from start to finish. We use a fancy theological word, "co-eternal," to describe the Trinity. This means there never was a time when all persons of the Trinity were not present to each other. At the heart of God, there is and always has been a community of being grounded in love. If you've been part of a family or community that truly is bound together in love, you have a grasp of what the Trinity is about.

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St. Augustine once described the Holy Trinity as the Lover, the Beloved and the Love they share. Total, self-giving love — continually offered and received in the heart of God; an eternal communion of love. That's the God we believe in. For us, this is the Real McCoy.

The third meaning of the Holy Trinity is that we are never beyond God's reach. Psalm 139 posed the right question thousands of years ago, "Where can I flee from God's presence?" After going through all the possible responses, the implicit answer is: nowhere. Wherever we go, and whatever the situation or circumstance, God is already there. But it takes a dynamic idea like the Trinity for this to make any sense. How can the entire universe, both seen and unseen, be filled with God's presence? This is possible because God made it and because the Holy Spirit is alive. Let's recall one implication of the Trinity: that not only is the Father God, so is the Son and so is the Holy Spirit. Not only co-eternal, but co-equal and co-inherent. Which is to say that when we think we've only got a little bit of God's presence, we're really not lacking any of it. In other words, you can't subdivide God. And because the Holy Spirit is within, among and outside us, God really is "all in all" (Ephesians 1:23). The Christian God is never absent or beyond us, even when we have trouble perceiving or feeling that Presence.

So far, I've said the Holy Trinity means, first, that God cannot easily be pigeon-holed or dismissed. Second, the God we worship is relational from start to finish. And third, this same God is never absent from us or beyond our reach. Now, the fourth implication of the Trinity: we are especially close to God's heart when we suffer. How else can we understand the words of Paul when, in his Letter to the Romans, he invites us to "boast in our sufferings"? Paul says we can boast because we know "that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (5:3-5). God pours love into us through the Holy Spirit. And because of this love, pain and suffering do not separate us God. The One who was crucified on the Cross is the same one who said we are blessed when we mourn, when we hunger, and when we suffer hardship. If you're dealing with a god who is static, or uncaring, or uninvolved in our lives, that just won't add up. It takes a dynamic and living god to carry us through the changes and chances of life.

Tomorrow is Memorial Day, and in the past several days, I've been giving thanks for the many who served our country since its founding. I've also been remembering my late father. Many of you know that he served in the Air Force in World War II. Some of you also know that his plane was shot down in Germany, and after he parachuted to safety, he was captured by the Germans and taken to a POW camp. Understandably, Dad didn't talk much about his experience as a prisoner of war. But from the few things he told me, one conclusion was unmistakable. Without faith in something bigger than us, most human beings could not survive an experience like that with their soul or their sanity intact. In times of trial, we need a god who is awesome and intimate, majestic and mysterious, loving and empowering. And we name that God the One in Three and Three in One.

Did you hear about the junk mail company that sent a publishers' sweepstakes letter to an Assembly of God church? Apparently, the computer took "Assembly" to be the recipient's last name, "God" as its first name and "of" as the middle name. The letter began, "God, we've been searching for you." Between two round, embossed seals, the letter encouraged God to "come forward"! "What an incredible fortune there would be for God," it said. "Could you just imagine the looks you'd get from your neighbors? But don't just sit there, God! Respond today using the enclosed, pre-paid envelope."\*\*\*

My sisters and brothers, isn't it great to know that God doesn't need junk mail or form letters to come forward? In a world searching for the Real McCoy, the God who loves us and the universe "stood up" long ago. This same God is here now: among us, between us and within us; Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.

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\*Ann Spivack, Reader's Digest (no date or page # provided).

\*\*Quoted by Elisabeth Elliot in Secure in the Everlasting Arms (Revell, 2002), p. 91.

\*\*\*Raymond McHenry, McHenry's Stories for the Soul (Hendrickson, 2001), p. 126.