

June 11, 2017 – Holy Trinity Sunday  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church  
Genesis 1-2a; Matthew 28:16-20

### **The Commission and the Creed**

We hear the very last verses of Matthew's gospel today. After twenty eight chapters covering Jesus' life and ministry, his death and resurrection, after all of that, there come the final three verses, the final words of this gospel, the final words of Jesus in this gospel, momentous last words, that have become known as the Great Commission. In the Great Commission Jesus says, "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples, of the all the people who look like you, and agree with you, and have an hour to spare on Sunday mornings."

Of course that's not the Great Commission. Jesus does not say go to one place and people—and make it people who are similar to you. In the Great Commission Jesus sends disciples to all nations, all people. This racial and geographic breadth was also emphasized last week, on Pentecost Sunday, when in the reading from the book of Acts there were people of all the different nations who were gathered, and all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit—we can be sure that country of origin was not the only difference among those gathered. We cannot overestimate the radically global nature of those on whom God alights, of those with whom God call us to be in relationship. In the Great Commission, Jesus sends those who would be disciples to be with people who are not like them. In the Great Commission Jesus sends disciples out to all nations, to teach and to baptize, in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

That's the emphasis this week, this Holy Trinity Sunday, this three-part name for God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, this Trinitarian formula, which means... what? The Holy Trinity is one of the great conundrums of Christianity, has been since way back. Since the very beginning it's been a question and a confusion, one of the greatest mysteries of Christianity: what does it mean that to say that God is Triune? Why do Christians say that?

Jesus, of course, was Jewish, that great and ancient faith, notable among others of the ancient world for being monotheistic, for worshipping one God. Monotheistic faith says that we are not playthings for a divine pantheon and we are not accidents. There is a great something that has created us and everything, that keeps the world spinning, and can guide humanity on how to live, how to help the earth live. We could call this something God, but Jewish people show religious reverence by not directly uttering or writing out the Almighty's name. Jesus, an observant Jew, shared this respect, supremely and uniquely modelled divine wonder—we could say that Jesus epitomized divine wonder—and Jesus also called the Almighty a name of incredible intimacy: Father. That's how Jesus described the source of all that is, as a Father—and Jesus invited others to think of God like that, too, pray to God like that. And then, yet more radically, Jesus also said that he was one with the Father, and that he did the work of the Father, and that he was going back to the Father, but that he would not leave disciples alone, would not leave them orphaned, would send someone to be with them.

Jesus said all of that in famous last words in another gospel, in the gospel of John. We hear those momentous and much more extended last words from Jesus in the Sundays leading up to Pentecost Sunday, when the gospel readings were Jesus' last words in John. Jesus' last words in Matthew say the same thing, in more condensed form. In the Great Commission, Jesus is saying the same thing about his oneness with the Father and his ongoing presence when he says

that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him, and that he will be with us, always, to the end of the age. Jesus, the perfect embodiment of God's grace and love is with us, always, through the Spirit, because God is three, and God is one. Jesus is God, and the Spirit is God, and the Father is God, and they're all different, but all one.

Find it confusing? So did the disciples. That's in the Great Commission, too, or rather, just before it. Maybe you noticed Matthew's final detail about the disciples. Again, remember all that's happened in the gospel up to this final point. The disciples have spent years with Jesus, listening to him teach and seeing him heal and then watching him die, and then hearing that he has risen. Now, here at the very end the disciples are gathered together, and they see the risen Jesus, and Matthew tells us, "When they saw him they worshipped, but some doubted." It's confusing.

Who is this God, in Jesus, through the Spirit? It's been one of the conundrums of Christianity since the very beginning. This is why we have creeds, because the disciples and people after, the early church was confused. The creeds are a response to the question of who God is and what God does, how God is one and three. You know the creeds we say in worship: the Apostle's Creed, or the Nicene Creed—or as some refer to the Nicene creed: the long creed. There's actually a third creed, which is even longer and just as old and even more focused on what the Trinity is. It's called the Athanasian Creed. Some years ago I attended a Lutheran church that, on Holy Trinity Sunday, would say the Athanasian creed, in its entirety. Today we're going to say an abbreviated version... in three parts, affirming the threeness and oneness of God.

But for all of this, for all that has been attested in scripture, and revealed in Christ, and continued in the Spirit, for all that Christian churches have been reciting Trinitarian creeds for centuries, many are still confused. Many still have a picture of God that is essentially pagan, so says the Catholic theologian and priest Richard Rohr. Trinitarian faith is a paradigm shift, Rohr says—a paradigm shift that many have not made. Trinitarian faith moves from seeing as God oppositional to relational, to understanding connection and community as God's very essence, God's relational, outpouring nature as the energy beneath and behind and before the universe. Christian faith has said that from the very beginning. But despite all of this, for many, even today, instead of a Trinitarian understanding of God, this is the what God is like: an old man with a beard, probably white (both the beard and the man) someone who has lots of rules, and frowns on fun, but might grant wishes, if you are good.

That's not the God we worship. That wouldn't get me here on a Sunday morning. Even more than that—so much more than that—that won't move me from the opposition, from the division that is within myself, and that is within our world, that pits us against ourselves and one another—especially anyone who is different. Overcoming that will take so much more than a cartoon. It will take a life force, a love, a power greater than anything my mind can fathom. It will take a God more vast, and close, and active, a mystery I cannot explain, but desperately need, and have inexplicably known. It will take the God we worship, the God we confess, the God in whom we are baptized, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.