

Sermon – Danny Trapp
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
May 30, 2010 – Trinity Sunday

Psalm 82
1 John 4:13-21

Catching Our Breath

I felt a bit out of the loop this past week. I have never watched even one minute of the television series *Lost*. In case you have been living under a rock, last Sunday evening most of the country was glued to their TV sets for the 2 ½ hour series finale. After six years of fantasy, science fiction and drama that spawned a loyal cult following of “Losties”, the popular series aired its final episode. If you are not familiar with the term “Lostie” I can help you out there. According to the online Urban Dictionary a “Lostie” is a person who is overly obsessed and easily excited with the hit TV show, *LOST*. A degree of fandom only attained by knowing way too much info about the show. My oldest daughter Simmons is a Lostie. The rest of my family, my wife Scottie, daughter Catherine and I are “Fringies”. We are hooked on the show *Fringe*, another fantasy, sci-fi drama that features an alternative universe, shape shifters and a bald man in a hat known as “the Observer”. The show is great fun and we gathered in front of the television 10 days ago for the season ending cliffhanger with almost as much anticipation as the fanatical “Losties”. Of course, not to rub it in, but our show is coming back next season. I take this little stroll down pop culture lane because it occurred to me this week while I worked on my sermon, with the din of the *Lost* frenzy as background noise, that the church operates in a similar fashion to these sci-fi serial dramas. We begin our liturgical year, the season opening episode if you will, with Advent. Advent is that period of waiting in expectation of the arrival of the Messiah, Emmanuel, God with us. The miracle of Christmas (a phenomena that *Lost* or *Fringe* cannot touch) is the culminating event but it really is just the beginning, God is loose in the world but there is more to come. Our drama progresses through the seasons of Epiphany

and Lent and the story arc, while always about God, shifts emphasis to the Son, Jesus, God incarnate. We get a mid-season cliffhanger in the form of Holy Week which ends in darkness as Jesus is crucified, dead and buried. Thank goodness we don't have to wait the entire summer to find out what happens because on the first day of the following week we celebrate the magnificence of the resurrection, God's yes to Jesus and no to the powers that would reject his life and ministry. Thus begins the season of Easter where we revel in the joyous revelation of the risen Christ and then we top it all off with Pentecost when God sent the Holy Spirit into the world in a crescendo of fire and wind, setting a course that brings us here to this place today. That's some ride we go on each year and as sort of a transitional bridge the calendar gives us a day to catch our breath before we enter into the season known in the church as Ordinary time. Now the label Ordinary time is not meant to imply that the rest of the year is somehow less important or interesting. I think it just helps put into context the period between December and June, or from Thanksgiving to Memorial Day if you want to put it into secular terms. There is no doubt that from a church standpoint this stretch that ended last week was indeed Extraordinary time. This respite we get today, call it a cleansing of the liturgical palette, is known as Trinity Sunday. This makes some sense because in our linear, concrete minds we have gone from the God of Advent and Christmas to the Jesus of Easter and the Holy Spirit of Pentecost. And there you have your Trinity. So just as the viewers of Lost or Fringe might sit back and reflect on their favorite TV series, we are invited to sit back and reflect on this mystery that we affirm every week but are hard pressed to explain or understand, this notion of the Trinity.

I think the Trinity has lost much of its oomph in modern culture. My task before you today is to preach on a question that most of us are not asking. What is this thing called the Trinity? Justo Gonzalez, now retired from the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, says that some people approach the Trinity like it was a crossword puzzle. Then he counters, "Trinity is a mystery, not a puzzle. Love is a mystery, a crossword is a puzzle. You try to solve a

puzzle, you stand in awe before a mystery." If we do try to approach the Trinity like a puzzle we cannot help but be confused. It can sound something like the famous Abbott and Costello routine "Who's on First". Someone actually wrote a skit on the subject of the Trinity based on this classic comedy bit. If I knew who it was I would give he or she credit but it starts off like this.

When you come to church you need to know the key players . . . you know, the ones who are worthy of honor and praise.

Honor and praise huh? Well who are they?

O.K., now listen closely. There is one God.

One God. That seems easy enough. What do you call this one God?

This one God is called, "God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit."

Now wait just a minute. You told me that there is only one God.

That's right!

So which is it?

So which is what?

Which name do you use for this one God?

The name I gave you.

But you gave me three names.

That's right.

What's right?

God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

So you have three Gods?

No, one God.

So which is it?

Which is what?

Father, Son or Holy Spirit?

Yes!

Yes to what?

That's God's name.

Which God?

Our one God.

Why did you give three names.

Because they aren't the same.

But you just told me there is one God. So which is it?

Which is what?

Which name is the name of your God?

I told you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit

But that is three!!

Yes, but it's only one.

Why did the church come up with such a confusing doctrine? And notice how I phrased that question. The Trinity is a doctrine of the church and you will not find the word trinity anywhere in your Bible nor will you find God explicitly described as three in one. Trinity Sunday is the only time we celebrate something that was not specifically a Biblical event. So what is this Trinity? Well I want to begin by mentioning a few things that the Trinity is not. First, the Trinity is not a fact. We cannot use our notion of the Triune God to claim that we have the only correct way of considering who God is. Nothing about God can be limited to our small minded inability to gaze upon the majesty and grandeur of the one who creates, redeems and sustains us. Secondly, the Trinity is not male. God cannot be limited by gender labels, that's our language, not God's. Having said that we also cannot remove gender entirely when we refer to the Christian God. We are dealing with a real live historical figure in the person of Jesus and we do have to accept the fact that Jesus was a guy. We also know that he referred to the Father,

Abba, which is better translated Daddy. So we cannot just ignore the maleness of Jesus but we can be intentional in talking about God in all of the ways available to us, not just default patriarchal language of the historical church. We are going to start doing a better job of that at Caldwell today when we substitute the 1988 version of the doxology for the one we have been using, last modified in 1709. And lastly, the Trinity is not optional. The Trinity is the very essence of Christianity and cannot be lined up with other difficult doctrines from which we pick and choose what to believe. There is much flexibility of belief in the reformed tradition and its okay to call into question say the historicity of the virgin birth or whether the miracle stories were meant to be taken literally. But to be Christian is to be Trinitarian, and to worship a triune God.

The most recent issue of the periodical The Presbyterian Outlook featured an article titled "What non-Christians don't understand about Christians". The author references Molly Marshall, a Baptist theologian who recently addressed a group of Christian, Jewish and Muslim clergy on the subject. Molly gives a list of misunderstandings that can help those of us inside the faith acknowledge that we may not agree on all aspects of theology but that we nonetheless can all be part of the family of faith. Interesting to me was the very first misunderstanding on her list. It was that we are not tri-theists but Trinitarians. She went on to say that we Christians would do well to be able to articulate a coherent understanding of the Trinity. Sounds like an oxymoron doesn't it? Coherent understanding of the Trinity. Difficult as it may be let's give it a shot. Not that I have figured it out mind you. After all it is the Trinity. Hopefully I can at least tease out an implication or two that may help spur your own thoughts and conclusions.

When I think about the Trinity three words tend to come to mind. Big surprise right? Those words are community, relationship and love. One might be tempted to express this artistically using a triangle, possibly with love at the top and community and relationship in each bottom corner. The image for me though is that of a circle. In the religious art of Eastern Orthodox churches, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are often pictured as three figures sitting

around a table together sharing a meal. The circle has far better implications for us than the triangle. Dr. Shirley Guthrie, the late professor of theology at Columbia Seminary says that John of Damascus, a Greek theologian who lived in the seventh century, developed this understanding of the Trinity with a concept called perichoresis. Peri means "around." "Choresis means literally "dancing." Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are like three dancers holding hands, dancing around together in harmonious, joyful freedom. This image makes "community" the very essence of the Trinity. The oneness of God is not the oneness of a distinct, self-contained individual; it is the unity of a community of persons who love each other and live together in harmony. They are what they are only in relationship to each other. Each exists only in this relationship and would not exist apart from it. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one social person, for each is with and for the other so intimately that they can be said to live in and through each other. This adds a new meaning to our word from 1 John, "For God is love."

Now this idea of God as community or relationship, while in one sense freeing is also problematic. It's problematic because it can make this doctrine seem mundane, even boring. It can feel mundane because we all know relationships; after all, we're all in relationships. Once we accept as mystery the central and confusing element of the Trinity – how can God be three persons in relationship, yet one God? – talking about the triune God as being in relationship feels a little ho-hum. So God is in relationship like we are in relationship. What's the big deal? Lutheran seminary professor David Marbury says the big deal is precisely that God is in relationship in a way that we are not in relationship. Or, better, God is in relationship in the way we were intended to be in relationship and are invited to be in relationship even now. The relationship of the three members of the Trinity is not only a relationship of equals, three persons sharing themselves fully, but also a relationship of complete and free interdependence. Our human condition makes this Trinitarian concept hard to grasp. Our world is incredibly binary – it is composed of pairs, pairs that go together, define each other, and ultimately are defined by

and over and under each other. Just about everything we know we learned in contrasting pairs; yes and no, up and down, hot and cold, black and white. Of course, we didn't learn it quite this way; it was a more pronounced contrast, as we understood that white was not black, no was not yes, and so forth. Later we learned who we are in the world in the same fashion, with the same binary and opposing contrasts attached: I am boy not girl, rich not poor, tall not short and so on. Each member of a binary pair defines itself *over and against* each other which introduces the element of power. But the Trinity is not like that. The three members of the Trinity do not – cannot – define themselves over and against each other but in, with, and through each other. We do not define the Father as the One who is not the Son and who is not the Spirit (a typical set of binary power plays). Rather, we understand the Father in and through the Son *and* the Spirit. Or, even more radically, God the Father cannot be Father *apart from* Son and Spirit. It is Son and Spirit that give context for, make sense of, even make possible the Father. This mutual, free, and shared interdependence is a wholly different kind of relationship than those that govern our world. The Trinity therefore not only holds out a possibility beyond our broken, binary relationships, but actually invites us into the sharing and interdependence of the God who is Three-in-One. In Baptism, we are invited to know who we are not in terms of what we aren't, but rather in terms of how much we are loved. We come to know who we are, that is, in terms of whose we are, the treasured possession of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Finally I want to bring this lofty doctrine of the trinity all the way down to our level. I believe the very essence of who you are as Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church is unapologetically Trinitarian. My experience here, both as a visitor over the past few years and now as an intern, is one of community, relationship and love. It's most concretely expressed in the slogan. God invites. We welcome. All. This is the dance of Caldwell, and it is played out in every aspect of the life of this church. Through joyful and energetic worship, heartfelt service and outreach to the community, advocacy on behalf of those with no voice or power, gatherings

around food, fellowship and song. To push the analogy a little further the slogan cannot work unless all three aspects are in play. There is no invitation without welcome. No opportunity to welcome if invitation doesn't take place, and to welcome some and not all would not really be true welcome. I say all this not to lavish you with praise or pat you on the back but rather to make the doctrine of the Trinity real and relevant. God is one. God is community. God is relationship. God is love.

If we are to believe the biblical drama and its witness to the depths to which God will go to draw us into the Trinitarian embrace, then we might suspect that just as each member of the Trinity is necessary to complete the other two, so also are we necessary to complete the Trinity. On this Trinity Sunday, as we catch our breath and reflect upon the story that has unfolded over the past six months, God gives us a priceless gift that we can share with all those we meet, all those whose life's baggage has become so full, so heavy, that they have forgotten who they are and whose they are. There is one God, who is relationship, who is Divine Dance, who is Love. And we are all God's Beloved.

In the name of the Triune God

Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer

Amen.