

Naming the Holy
(a response to the Pioneer Press) July 30
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
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Scripture: Exodus 3:1-15 and Romans 5:1-5

The front page headline blared: “The Trinity By Any Other Name Splits Presbyterians.” The subtitle, was just as sensationalist and, as I will show, misleading: “Suggested Alternatives Raise Controversy Within Church.” One pastor was quoted as saying, “You might as well put in Huey, Dewey, and Louie.”¹

Now I don’t know the Rev. Mark Brewer, the senior minister of Bel Air Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles with the gift for memorably dismissive quotes. But I do know this. If the Saint Paul Pioneer Press or Minneapolis StarTribune ran a front-page article alleging major concerns within the chemical industry but did not talk to a local 3M representative for context, quotes, or rebuttals, there would have been -- figuratively speaking, of course -- hell to pay. But apparently it is ok to run a front-page article about Presbyterians that would have a local impact without checking with any local sources.

I was amused to see that the same Pioneer Press ran another wire story this week, this time about dueling press releases in the campaign for Minnesota’s United States Senate seat. “Outrageousness is part of the fun of our political process,” said Wayne Fields, a political rhetoric expert. But, the expert continues,

as outrageousness becomes the default tone of politics, it threatens to drain the substance out of political debate. “It lets you say certain things without an argument or without proof, because it's wrapped up in this snappy, clever approach.”²

And a clever, snappy quote it was. With whatever happened down there in Birmingham at the Presbyterian General Assembly, we might as well call God “Huey, Dewey, and Louie.” Outrageous and snappy – that one quick sentence is enough to get your blood pressure up. And it did – I have spoken with many of you about this article.

What really happened? one might ask. Unfortunately, the Pioneer Press did not ask that question – it simply picked up a poorly written article from some other newspaper and stuck it on their front page. There must be a huge conflict, right? Changing long-standing practices in a prominent religious group? Stop the presses, put it on the front page. Never mind any local impact. But the question of what really happened is a worthy one.

By the headline and tone of the article, readers could hardly avoid thinking that Presbyterians were making major changes in doctrine or worship practices. Not so. A study paper was presented and received on the challenging theological topic of the Trinity. This was a study paper – not a policy paper, not a confession. Not a major change. Some of the “additional

possibilities” offered in this paper comes from such new-fangled thinkers as Augustine (an influential 4th and 5th century theologian and church leader). Maybe you have heard of him as Saint Augustine? Hardly Donald Duck theology here.

Interestingly, the report was commissioned not because of any simmering controversy, but for the opposite reason. The writers of this study paper on the Trinity begin by saying,

often the church takes up a theological issue only when there is great controversy – a time when a lack of consensus on an issue embroils the church in an intractable debate. The doctrine of the Trinity is a pressing issue for contemporary Presbyterians for precisely the opposite reason. Despite the remarkable renewal of Trinitarian theology in recent decades, this doctrine is widely neglected or poorly understood in many of our congregations.³

So, with a study paper begun on a topic thought to be in neglect, the Trinity is now front-page news.

The Trinity has always been a challenging theological topic. That the One God is known to us as three “persons” who are not really persons. Did you know that the word “Trinity” does not appear in the Bible? It was actually a rather late-theological doctrine of the early church.

For centuries, serious theologians have struggled with two different problems: the first is the struggle with how to interpret the Trinity on a very basic level, such as in a children’s sermon or in an interfaith dialogue with others coming from a monotheistic faith. How can one be three and three be one? And the Trinity study paper appreciatively quotes theologian Gregory of Nazianzuz: “No sooner do I conceive of the one than I am illumined by the splendor of the three; no sooner do I distinguish them than I am carried back to the one.”⁴

The second problem with which theologians contend is dealing with nuanced concerns that have been labeled heresies in the past. I doubt you came to church today to hear a lecture on heresies – but suffice it to say that theologians worry in articulating the trinity they will reduce God to functions, or suggest a hierarchy, for example that God the Father precedes the Son in time or importance. In an editorial in the magazine The Christian Century about this issue, “we might sum up the early church’s debate by saying that “Father, Son and Holy Spirit” represents the least misleading way to refer to God.⁵

The study paper says, “The language of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, rooted in scripture and creed, remains an indispensable anchor for our efforts to speak faithfully of God.” And during worship here at Central, we use a significant amount of the liturgical formula “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” The Gloria Patri and the doxology are two weekly examples. But there are potential limitations in using the words Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As Duke theologian Mary McClintock Fulkerson says, it can be heard as if the Trinity “is two boys and a bird.”⁶

And so, to explain this mysterious community of God in three persons who are not really persons, we turn to other language to nurture our imaginations, to stir our souls, to answer questions about how God can then relate to us.

In the Children's Sermon today we used the analogy that the Trinity is like water in that the same stuff can be in three different forms: liquid, ice, steam. It is not a perfect teaching tool, nor is it a complete picture of what God is like. But then as I was preparing this sermon, I read an article in Time magazine about an evangelical scientist who credits his conversion to hiking past a massive, frozen, three-stream waterfall that for him recalled the Trinity.⁷

One section of the report, titled "a Plenitude of Images of the Trinity," has drawn the most criticism. This section begins by saying,

Recognizing that all language about the triune God refers beyond itself by way of analogy, we draw on scripture and our confessions to speak of the triune God in historically faithful yet freshly imaginative ways.

This is a sermon, not a mad letter to the editor, and since you are here because of faith let me quote the study paper itself as it offers images to help us understand the Trinity.⁸

Using a Trinitarian formula found in Romans 11:36. As we worship, the triune God is the One From Whom, the One through Whom, and the One in Whom we offer our praise.

As we seek God's grace and wholeness, acknowledging the sin and brokenness in us, our human communities, and the whole creation, the triune God is our Rainbow of Promise, our Ark of Salvation, and our Dove of Peace (from Gail Ramshaw, *Koinonia: Services and Prayers*, Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2004).

Drawing on a number of Bible passages, including Hebrews, the Gospel of John, and the Psalms: As we read, proclaim, hear, and live out the message of scripture, the triune God is known to us as Speaker, Word, and Breath. (Heb 1:1, Jn 1:1; Jn 20:22, Ps 104:30)

In baptism, the triune God is for us Overflowing Font, Living Water, Flowing River (*Book of Common Worship*, p. 412; Jn 4:10, 13-14; Jn 7:37).

From the prophet Isaiah and the Gospel of Matthew: As we are born anew by water and the Spirit, the triune God is Compassionate Mother, Beloved Child, and Life-giving Womb (Isa 49:15; Mt 3:17; Isa 46:3). [This Trinitarian formulation in particular has been a lightning rod, but is rooted deeply in the Bible.]

As we grow in grace, the triune God is our Sun, Light, and Burning Ray (articulated this way by theologian John of Damascus, *First Apology*). He is also known as Saint John Damascene.

As we offer ourselves, our resources, and our gratitude in stewardship and Eucharist, the triune God is Giver, Gift, and Giving (Jas 1:17; Jn 3:16; 2 Cor 9:15; 1 Jn 3:24).

In celebrating the communion of our life together in Christ, the triune God is Lover, Beloved, and the Love that binds together Lover and Beloved (this is Saint Augustine's formulation, *The Trinity*).

As members of the believing community, we acknowledge the triune God as our Rock, Cornerstone, and Temple (Ps 28:1; Eph 2:20-21).

When we speak of God's wrath in the face of evil, the triune God is for us Fire that Consumes, Sword that Divides, and Storm that Melts Mountains (Deut 5:25; Mt 10:34-35; Ps 97:5).

And from Revelations 4:8: As we seek to live in faith, love, and hope, the triune God is for us the One Who Was, the One Who Is, and the One Who Is To Come.

And the report concludes this section by saying, "In these and other ways we stammer to confess that the triune God is an inexhaustible mystery of purifying and transforming love."

These "additions," that the writer reprinted in the Pioneer Press worries about or hardly new, but instead, helpful. **"You might as well put in Huey, Dewey, and Louie"?** **I do NOT think so.** While some of these images may be new or uncomfortable, they are rooted in the Bible, classical theologians, and the confessions. And remember, this was a study paper, not a proposal with recommendations for change.

Then what is going on? Why all the controversy? Why the apparent conflict? Why would some pastor in LA convince some writer that the sky was falling?

It turns out there is a conflict, but any investigative journalist would realize that this issue is being used as a pretext. In fact, there was a meeting in Tulsa this week of disaffected Presbyterians. Talking about whether now is time to leave the denomination and how best that should be done. They call themselves the New Wineskins Association – recalling Jesus's saying that you can't put new wine in an old wineskin. And so they are trying to create a new system.

One speaker said to great applause, "God has told us His Name - it is Father. He does not need a nickname." But then during spontaneous prayer times, people addressed God as Lord, Redeemer, El Shaddai, Rock of Salvation, even Fire That Burns. And speaking of nicknames, the (Starbucks) coffee house in the church is called Jehovah Java.⁹ **Do you see the hypocrisy?**

There is a mean-spirited caricature of this report that is being used as a pretext to say everything Presbyterian is just bad these days by folks who are considering leaving for other reasons. I don't know the full details of the origin of the Los Angeles Times article, but it is clear that an attempt is being made to divide and dismiss Presbyterians under the pretext that we now believe in a mickey-mouse God.

So how do we proceed? First, distortions and poor journalism must be confronted and corrected. And I have spoken to folks from the Pioneer Press and have submitted an editorial

piece that may get printed this coming week. Second, our biblical stories for today give us some tools for our thinking and speaking of the triune God.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, we are told that Moses asked for God's name, and God replied, "I am who I am" or "I will be who I will be" using just four consonants with an unclear tense. The letters spelling the name out are so holy that in some Jewish movements the sacred name is not even to be pronounced, though Christians have often translated that name as Yahweh or Jehovah. But note the great freedom that God's name implies. "I am who I am." "I will be who I will be." God does not say that the divine name is "I will be who you say I am!" "Or I am who the Pioneer Press says that I am." No, God said, "I am who I am." So our talk about God must always be humble and careful, aware that God is who God is, and God will be who God will be.

Believe it or not, church fights are not something new. Most of the churches described in the Bible had conflicts. The Apostle Paul dealt with churches in conflict. There are even places in his letters where a rather harsh spirit emerges. But some things are off limits, even for church fights. And one of those things ought to be how we describe and name God.

Therefore, since we are 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; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing 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 (Romans 5:1-5).

Paul, caught up in many a church fight, does not manipulate God's name for partisan gain. If we are to boast, it is about a hope in sharing the glory of God, not controlling God. Paul connects the Trinity and God's overflowing love to aspirations for human qualities like peace, hope, endurance, love.

In our polarized culture, we need a respectful civility in our discourse. Exchanging zingers tit for tat doesn't help the church and it certainly doesn't help our communities. We need a press that will serve not as a mouthpiece for outrageous political comments, but provide thoughtful analysis that digs below quotes. The role of the media, and perhaps more importantly, the role we all have to play as neighbors, citizens, and members of particular faith communities – is to explore the depths of what we believe. We all should be respectful of others when they disagree. And we all should do some of the standard work of the press – checking facts and assumptions before we speak or print, being skeptical of outrageous comments, and caring about the impact of our words and actions. And if we do that, we will be following in the ways of the triune God, whose love has been poured into our hearts and overflows from creation to redemption, in a spirit of love and peace and hope. Amen.

¹ “The Trinity By Any Other Name Splits Presbyterians: Suggested Alternatives Raise Controversy within Church,” By K. Connie Kang, originally published in the Los Angeles Times, published by the Saint Paul Pioneer Press, 1 July, 2006 A1.

² “Political Pros Sharpen Their Knives in Press Release Wars,” by Patrick Condon (Associated Press). The Pioneer Press online, www.twincities.com. The political rhetoric expert is Wayne Fields who directs the American Culture Studies program at Washington University in St. Louis.

³ From the introduction to “The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing.” This full study paper can be found on the website of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), www.pcusa.org/theologyandworship/issues/trinityfinal.pdf.

⁴ Ibid., 6. Gregory of Nazanzus was a fourth century “church father.”

⁵ “What’s in a name?” The Christian Century, 25 July 2006.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ David Van Biema, “Reconciling God and Science,” Time 17 July 2006, 47. The scientist is genome mapper Francis Collins, author of The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief.

⁸ What follows is a direct reading of the section of the Trinity Report, lines 394 – 427. This sermon provides the same biblical references and theological attributions as the report, but in a way more easily heard than read. So my attributions are the same as the ones in the paper, but appear in a different format.

⁹ The speaker was Carmen Fowler and her words were quoted in several different news accounts of the event and blogs. I am grateful to friends who were in attendance at this gathering for this account of words used for God during times of prayer.