

The Cross and the Triangle

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Mark 1:1-15; Matthew 28:16-20

This is the beginning of the good news announcement about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, just as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: “I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way. The voice of one who cries out in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight!’”

John the Baptizer was in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him. And they were baptized by him in the Jordan river, as they confessed their sins.

John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. And he proclaimed this: “Someone stronger than me is coming along after me. I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals. I baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

It was in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee. He was baptized in the Jordan by John. And as soon as he came up out of the water, he saw the heavens splitting open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my dear Son; I am so pleased with you!”

But right away the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals. And the angels looked after him.

After John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, announcing the good news about God. He said, “The time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news!”

After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene and to another Mary. He gave them a message for the disciples — his “brothers,” he called them. They were to meet him in Galilee.

The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the hill where Jesus had told them [to go]. When they saw him, they worshiped; but some doubted. Then Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth is given to me. Go, then, and disciple all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And look, I will be with you every day until this age is over.”

Sermon

You probably don’t notice it any more, but every Sunday when you enter this building, you walk underneath a cross and a triangle. Since 1968 the overlapping cross and triangle have been the official symbol of the Christian Reformed Church. The symbol was intended to be instantly recognized and easily remembered, and it is just that. Christian Reformed people know their own symbol, even if the rest of the world doesn’t. The overlapping cross and triangle says, to us at least, *Christian Reformed Church*.

Of course, you might get confused about that in downtown Columbus. Above the main doors of the First Congregational Church building on East Broad Street, carved in stone, is this motto: “Enter to worship; depart to serve.” To the left of the motto, an overlapping triangle and circle are carved in the stone. And to the right, in the same stone, an overlapping cross and triangle are carved. I’m sure the cross and triangle at First Congregational predates 1968. I’ve made an inquiry of the staff at First Congregational to find out for sure, but I’m still waiting for an answer. However, I do know from senior

minister Tim Ahrens that the cross and triangle symbol do not have a meaningful function at First Congregational. For the Christian Reformed Church, such is not the case. For us the overlapping cross and triangle is a living symbol.

Besides identifying us, to ourselves at least, the denominational symbol makes a theological statement. In the first place, it affirms the centrality of the cross of Jesus Christ. Following Paul, we in the Christian Reformed Church proclaim Christ crucified. At the same time, the denominational symbol affirms our faith in the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This affirmation is not accidental. Nor is it incidental. Rather it goes to the heart of our faith.

We are trinitarian through and through. We know God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or we don't know God at all. It took the church of Christ a few hundred years to find an enduring way to express its faith in the Trinity — you can read that expression in the Nicene Creed, from the 4th century, in the back of the *Psalter Hymnal*. It took a few hundred years, but from the beginning the Scriptures of the church and the experience of the church were united in this affirmation: God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Now, this is not a nice little dogma to tuck away in a corner until you take it out once a year to polish it then put it back. No, this dogma belongs out in the open, lest we forget who God is and who we are.

I told you recently about a We Believe Ohio event at the state house and about the gathering afterward in a downtown church. I told you how there was a font with water in it at the church and how I put some of that water on my forehead as a reminder, in that interfaith setting — Jews, Christians, Unitarians, Muslims, Sikhs — of my baptismal identity.

I told you I did that, but I didn't tell you what else I did. When I entered Trinity Episcopal Church, I slid into a pew, put down the kneeler, and got on my knees to pray. But first, I crossed myself: “. . . in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” Now, we don't cross ourselves in the Christian Reformed Church. We cross our buildings, but not our bodies. But I did it anyway. I did it to remember who God is — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, come to us in Jesus Christ. And I did it to remember who I am — Christian and trinitarian through and through. In an interfaith setting (and most any place else), I could do far worse than to mark myself with the cross of Jesus Christ and to invoke “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” — which is exactly what our denominational symbol, the overlapping cross and triangle, does.

The fact is, our Christian identity is founded on the Trinity. It begins with our baptism, the mark of our Christian identity. When we talk about baptism in the Reformed tradition, we emphasize God's covenant. God made a covenant with Abraham, complete with precious promises. God has been keeping those covenant promises ever since — that's the focus of the entire biblical story. Through Jesus Christ, those covenant promises have come to us. And baptism is the sign. Now, that's good theology. It's wonderful as far as it goes. But baptism is not exhausted by “covenant.”

We are baptized specifically into the name of the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are not identified with some generic, one-size-fits-all “god,” the god of people these days who are “spiritual,” but not very “religious,” the god of the ideology that says “all religions are basically the same.” No, we are identified with the God who is made known — in the creation and preservation of the world, in Holy Scripture, and above all in Jesus Christ — specifically as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I do not love and I am not loved by a generic wife and some generic children. I love and am loved by very specific people: Jan, Katie, Kristi, Martha. In the same way, as our baptism declares, the God who loves us, the God we love, is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — or Father, Jesus, and Holy Spirit, since the Son has a human name.

Flowing from our baptism, our discipleship expresses trinitarian faith. This began with Jesus and his baptism. Jesus's baptism presents us with a trinitarian tableau. The Son steps into the river to be baptized. The Spirit descends upon the Son as a dove. And the Father speaks a word of identification and approval: "You are my dear Son. I am so pleased with you!" Then without a moment's hesitation, Jesus enters the proving ground where he is tried, tested, and declared fit for his mission to announce, embody, and enact the "good news about God."

Our discipleship flows from the same trinitarian source. Again, it's a matter of our identity. Christ's disciples are baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity. Beyond that, it's a matter of mission and obedience, as expressed, in trinitarian fashion, in the Great Commission. According to that Great Commission, discipleship at its center is about obedience to Jesus and his commandments, commandments that are not burdensome but set us free to live fully and to love. This obedience is given to Jesus because he has all authority. He is the Son and has been entrusted with this authority by the Father. And this obedience to Jesus and his commandments is not burdensome because Jesus shares the yoke with us. He is "with [us] every day" through the Holy Spirit. And so the source, the design, and the empowerment for our discipleship come from the Trinity.

And our discipleship expresses trinitarian faith. Our prayer, for example, is trinitarian. We pray to the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit. The Father is the audience for our prayers. In prayer we talk to the Father who loves us. Jesus is the pathway for our prayers. Jesus is the older brother who brings us home to the Father. And the Holy Spirit is our partner in prayer. The Spirit takes the words and groans of our prayers, lousy as they may be, and turns them into music. So our prayer is trinitarian.

And then there's our Gospel witness, which is also trinitarian. We tell people (yes, witness is about telling others what you've seen and what you know!) — we tell people about the Father's benevolent purpose for creation and for all people. We tell them that the Father loves what he has made, that he has not let go and will not let go. We tell people about Jesus, who decisively enacts the Father's purpose, resolving outstanding issues of sin and forgiveness, of justice and mercy. And we tell people about the Holy Spirit's energizing presence, forming the church as the genuine (though still flawed) people of God, and renewing our hearts decisively and also little by little, day by day. So our Gospel witness is trinitarian.

Actually, our entire journey through life is trinitarian. The Father exercises providential care over us. So we are not merely victims of chance or fate. What happens to us — much of it indifferent, some of it blissfully good, some of it crushingly bad — what happens to us, the Father turns to our good. And throughout our journey, the Son goes before us, showing the way. By words and deeds, by suffering and sacrifice, Jesus points us toward the Kingdom of God, toward a way of life that is not about ourselves, but about glory for God and blessing for others. And all along the way, the Holy Spirit lives within us as individuals and as a community of faith. The Spirit turns our hearts and minds toward Jesus. The Spirit activates our conscience. The Spirit inspires us to be servants of God, not pawns of the Pentagon, not a consumer herd assembled to enrich the advertisers on American Idol, not narrow-minded intellectuals — not when we're meant to be so much more, not when our entire journey through life is meant to be trinitarian.

That's probably more than enough Trinity-talk for one morning. Let me encourage you, though, in this. Each Sunday take a moment to notice that overlapping cross and triangle as you walk underneath it on your way into this place and on your way out. As the motto at First Congregational Church has it, be sure that you "enter to worship." Have your heart and mind set on glorifying Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in whose name you have been baptized. And on your way out, be sure that you "depart to serve," to make your life an offering to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who send you, equip you, and accompany you "every day until this age is over."