

Will Any God Do?

Matthew 28:16-20

Trinity Sunday - May 26, 2024

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A pastor was sitting in his New York City church when a stranger walked in. The man asked if he could light a candle. Before the pastor could respond, the man added, "By the way, what kind of church is this?" The pastor opened his mouth to explain, but the stranger cut him off. "Not that it makes any difference," he said. "I don't favor any particular kind of religion. Whenever I pass a place of worship, I like to stop, light a candle, and plug into the divine. Really, any god will do."

Clearly there are many ways that people use to approach the divine. They light a candle, rub a crystal, whisper a prayer. We find examples all over the world, both past and present. At Machu Picchu in Peru, Incas once worshipped the sun god. At St. Peter's Square in Rome, adoring crowds wait for Pope Francis to bless them. In Istanbul, Turkey, the muezzin calls Muslims to prayer at noontime on Friday. Even though Turkey has freedom of religion, Muslims by the millions stop what they're doing, go to a local mosque, listen to a sermon, and pray. And then they go back to work. Everywhere, it seems, people are looking for an encounter with God.

Tolerance and respect for other religions is a topic we hear a lot about these days. In our pluralistic world, it's something of a necessity. People say things like: "We're all headed in the same direction; we're just taking different roads to get there. Really, any god will do."

So, what do you think, is this open-mindedness a good thing? On the one hand, we want to say yes. We should make room for those who are different from us. On the other hand, we struggle to know what to do with the distinctive claims of Christianity. After all, Jesus gives us the great commission intending that we will share the good news – his good news – with others. "Go and make disciples of all nations," he says. So, what are we supposed to do—Be tolerant? Evangelistic? Maybe something in-between?

Today is Holy Trinity Sunday. It's the only Sunday of the church year that is devoted exclusively to a church doctrine. We sing the hymn "Holy, Holy, Holy" and we claim to believe in one God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy

Spirit. I'll be the first to admit that this doctrine is hard to understand. There is much about the divine that is mysterious and beyond our grasp.

When I traveled in Turkey, I was reminded an early church controversy over the nature of God. It was in the 4th century A.D. There were believers known as Cappadocian Christians. They were part of the Eastern Church, as compared to the Western Church in Rome. The center of the Eastern Church for over 1000 years was Constantinople, the city we call Istanbul today. Cappadocian Fathers such as Basil, and his brother Gregory, and another friend named Gregory, came to firmly believe in the idea of the Trinity. And they did it while enduring a rugged existence, often living in homes and churches carved out of lava rock in the mountains of Cappadocia. You probably saw a picture of one such church on the bulletin cover. It was just down the street from our hotel.

One God in three persons might seem easy to us, but in the first centuries of Christianity, it was a fierce conflict. In the world in which they lived, they were surrounded by Greek, Roman, and tribal gods and goddesses. On the Christian side of things, a fellow named Arias claimed that Jesus was holy, but since he had an actual beginning in Jesus of Nazareth, then he could not be equal to God the Father. Arianism was winning the day, until the Cappadocian Fathers entered the fray. They fought long and hard. Eventually they championed the three-in-one concept. It was put into words in the earliest Christian creed – the Nicene Creed – which came out of the Turkish city of Nicaea in the 4th century. In a few minutes, as we recite the Nicene Creed, look for evidence of truth claims about Jesus that were set forth by the Cappadocian Fathers. Clearly for Cappadocians in the 4th century, not just any god would do.

Over time, the Church – both East and West – has come to accept the doctrine of the Trinity. But you know as well as I, we still struggle to understand this God we call Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Author Rob Bell writes about this in his book, *What We Talk about When We Talk about God*. Bell gives us three little words to consider: *with*, *for*, and *ahead*. He uses these words to paint a picture of a God—a big God—who is *with*, *for*, and *ahead of* people everywhere.

So, back to our question: *Will any God do for us?* Says Bell: Not when it comes to the confidence that **God is with us**. Genesis 1 paints a picture of what God is up to in the world. “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth...a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” The word for “wind” is *ruach*. It implies that God is the life force of all that is made. God is not just acting *on* creation, but is somehow part of the very fabric *of* it.

Still, the Hebrews were careful not to say that God was the sunset, or the tree, or the mountain. Rather, God is *in* these things. The energy of *ruach* can be as wide as the universe, and powerful enough to sustain the Milky Way, but it can also be as intimate as the breath giving life to a newborn baby. Friends, as you search for the confidence that God is *with* you, pay attention to the God of creation. A glimpse of the moon, a stand of new corn, the delicate wings of a butterfly remind us that God is with us.

Will any God do for us? Says Bell: Not when it comes to the assurance that **God is for us**. Do you believe that God's desire is that you flourish and thrive and become more and more your true self? It's a simple question, but for a staggering number of people, the "for" of God is buried under a massive pile of "againsts." *God will love you...but only if you're lovable. God will be on your side...but only if you're good.* We tend to operate under the assumption that if we are just better people—more kind, more loving—then we will be blessed by God. It becomes a kind of massive point system.

Friends, are you searching for the assurance that God is for you? Take a look at the God we see in Jesus. Jesus comes along and says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." It's a radical word. The poor in spirit are those who don't have it all together. They're the nobodies, the has-beens, the not-good-enoughs. Jesus is essentially telling them, "God is on your side." And get this, Jesus doesn't use a point system. He offers the revolutionary announcement that in our moments of greatest despair and failure and sin, God meets us there. God announces in Jesus, "I am *for* you. And I've been on your side all along."

Will any God do for us? Not when it comes to the promise that **God is ahead of us**. Do you believe that God is out in front of you? It's one of the central questions of our time: Is God pulling us forward, giving us a future and a hope? Or is God behind us, trying to get us to return to how things used to be? Perhaps these two ideas are not mutually exclusive, but it can seem that way sometimes.

Many see the Bible as some sort of eternal rule book: God spoke once and for all; all the answers are there; we just need to get back to the Good Book. There is some wisdom to this thinking. *You shall not kill. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal.* These rules haven't exactly changed over the years.

Then again, there's another way to look at the Bible too: as a sort of "divine pull" that is moving things forward. History has a goal; the kingdom is coming; God is not done speaking. We see this divine pull over and over in scripture. God calls Abraham and Sarah to give up their tribal god so that the God of heaven and earth can use them to love and bless all the other tribes of the earth. God calls a young woman named Mary to give birth to a baby boy that will turn the world upside down. These people don't find God simply by looking backward. No, they find God by looking ahead and by trusting that God is still speaking.

Friends, are you searching for the assurance that God is ahead of you? Take a look at the God of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit calls us to a future that is more than we could ever dream up on our own. And it's a future far more inclusive that we could ever imagine: Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free, and so many more.

Will any God do for us? Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe we have moments when we need to name God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Hopefully we can find ways to share with others that God is *with* them, and *for* them, and *ahead of* them, just like we believe that God is *with, for, and ahead of us*.

Are we all headed in the same direction? I don't know. That's God's job to figure out. What I do know is that God has a way of showing up when we least expect it and doing some of the most amazing things.

Rob Bell ends his book with a simple story exemplifying God's habit of showing up. He writes: "One morning I was surfing just after sunrise. There was only one other surfer out. In between sets he and I started talking. He told me about his work and his family, and then, after about an hour in the water together, he told me how he'd been an alcoholic and a drug addict and an atheist and then he'd gotten clean and sober and found God in the process. As he sat there floating on his board next to me, a hundred or so yards from shore, without a cloud in the sky and the surface of the water like glass, he looked around and said, "And now I see God everywhere."

Friends, what more could we want for anyone and for us? Amen.