

Flad's Wager

May 26, 2024

Pascal's Wager

Have you ever heard the phrase, "There are no atheists in foxholes?" The idea is that, when the chips are down, when we are at our most scared and most vulnerable, everyone believes there's a God. Or at least hopes there's a God.

While I doubt this sentiment is completely true, it has been my experience that tragedy and fear can motivate people toward prayer. Sadly, I think of the experience of so many people amidst war, not only those in combat but also their family and loved ones, praying constantly for the safety of their beloved. Or the parents and families of children with cancer, folks who may or may not have believed in God who, in their desperation, turn to prayer as yet one more avenue of healing for their child. And who would blame them? Of course, any reasonable human being is going to exhaust ALL of the possible interventions to save someone they love.

The idea that "there are no atheists in foxholes" is really a layperson's way to express Pascal's wager, a philosophical argument laid out by 17th century French mathematician Blaise Pascal. Pascal's argument goes like this: Any rational person should go about their life actively striving to believe in God. His rationale is this: if you behave as if there is a God, and it turns out that there is not, your losses are minimal – maybe you lose out on some pleasure or luxury, but nothing of consequence. However, if you behave as if there is not a God, and it turns out that God does indeed exist, you risk the possibility of losing heaven and maybe even spending the rest of eternity in hell. More simply put – if God doesn't exist, it really ends up being no skin off your nose, whereas if God does exist, the risk is heaven and hell. Of course, the biggest critique of Pascal's wager comes down to authenticity. If you're "believing" in God just to achieve heaven and avoid hell, what kind of belief is that?

Quite frankly, this critique from authenticity is what keeps me from preaching much about heaven and hell. Genuine belief isn't rooted in eternal reward, but rather in a love of God, neighbor, and self. (I'm quoting Jesus there, in case you doubt me.)

Trinity Sunday

Churches that follow the Liturgical Calendar celebrate Trinity Sunday this week, the week after Pentecost. Like Pascal's Wager, the Trinity is pretty esoteric, actually. Even though most people who are raised in Christianity, if asked to define God, will use the word Trinity or will talk about Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the idea of the Trinity is inscrutable enough that few will go any farther.

You'll notice that I say the "idea" of the Trinity, not the "doctrine" of the Trinity. I say that explicitly because every time we try to name God, to define God, we are going to fall short. Theologian Sandra Schneiders puts it quite bluntly: "God is not two dudes and a bird."

The church, in declaring the Trinity a doctrine and then exclusively using "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" language to name the aspects of the Trinity, have, in short, created an idol. Sadly, when pushed on this, many traditional churches double down. Elizabeth Johnson, a phenomenal

theologian, wrote a book about the Trinity a few years ago called, “The Quest for the Living God.” She was blasted by traditional churches for saying that all ways that we name and describe God are metaphors. Of course they are! This is God we’re talking about. In the words of our middle hymn today, “Immortal, invisible, God only wise.”

The very notion of God IS that it is so much larger, so much broader, so much more complex than our mere human brains can comprehend that everything we say about God is going to be partial, a component, an aspect. In short, our God language, including that of the Trinity, is a metaphor. This thinking is bolstered by the UCC’s notion that “God is still speaking,” that God continues to reveal God’s self and interact with us, and therefore new expressions of the divine are continually adding to what we know about God.

In fact, this is further backed up by our scripture readings today. Both our Psalm and our passage from Isaiah use poetry and metaphor and imagery to point toward God, because defining God is always going to fall short. The reality is that ever since the enlightenment, Christians have treated the Trinity as a definition of God, instead of a description. While describing God as “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” is a good, doing so exclusively has left us with a handful of problems.

First, those of us who were fathered well can get a glimpse of Divine Reality when we describe God as father, but for those who were not fathered well, or whose fathers were even hurtful or worse, this image not only doesn’t work, it can do harm. For some, Father means cold, callous, even abusive or absent, and naming God exclusively as father then carries those traits over to God as well. Additionally, the exclusive use of “Father” to describe God has been central to the exclusion of women in roles in the church. I’m not only talking about churches who don’t have female clergy. The exclusive use of male language to describe God trickles down into agency, basic human dignity, and how women are regarded in every other way. Just ask the women who graduated from Benedictine College earlier this month.

Redeeming the Trinity

All of this is to say, that while exclusively using “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” to name the Divine has its problems, Trinity is still an abundantly helpful construct to help us wrap our minds around it. Once we’ve loosened our grip on “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” as definitions of God, we can explore other metaphors within Trinity. Let’s try Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer.

This is one that I use very often in baptism. Instead of using gender language, it names three core actions of the divine. God is our Creator: exists beyond time, is the source of all that is and all that ever will be. God is our Redeemer: remember, to “redeem” is to bring back, to return, so God as Redeemer is the function of God who helps us to come back – come back home, come back to who we are created to be, come back from the ways we have strayed, from our faults, our sins, our wayward ways. And God as our Sustainer blesses us, giving us energy and divine wisdom and courage. This is the manifestation of God that stays with us, that animates us, that gives us the words when we can’t imagine what to say, that gives us the gifts of character to stand up for what is right.

Or, how about thinking of Trinity as “What was, what is, and what will be”? Or as the sun, sunshine, and the energy that sunshine manifests in plants and in us? I’ll never forget the first time I heard this concept of the Trinity. It made so much sense to me – God as the source being the sun, God on earth in and amongst us as the rays, God which infuses us and animates us as energy.

Conclusion

Friends, as we try to wrap our minds around the concept of Trinity, it’s wise to remember that talk of God is all image, all metaphor, all “through a glass darkly.” Some of the brightest minds in human history have spent their entire lives trying to wrap themselves around the ultimate reality of God. How do the aspects of the Trinity interact? Is one before the others? Is one superior or are they co-equal? If these questions are your thing, I can recommend a couple of really fine books on the subject.

At the beginning of my remarks today, I lifted up the concept of Pascal’s Wager, the idea that we should believe in God because believing in God has few if any consequences, whereas not believing in God could damn us to the eternal fires of hell. I also was frank that the glaring flaw in this philosophy is a lack of authenticity. If anyone’s going to be able to see that we’re faking it, I’d assume that God could.

So, in place of Pascal’s Wager, four hundred years after the brilliant French mathematician wielded fear to motivate people to believe in God, I instead offer you Flad’s Wager! What if, instead of believing in God, authentically or inauthentically, out of the fear of risking the eternal hell fires, what if we treat others with mercy and compassion and kindness and respect out of hope that God exists? What if we behave as if God is working in and through us, motivating us to repair the messes that human beings have made in this world? What could it hurt? If we’re wrong and there isn’t a God, we’ve left the world a better place. AND, if we’re right and there is a God, we’ve left the world a better place. If we do justice and love kindness and walk humbly and there is no God, then the worst thing that will have happened is that we did justice and loved kindness and walked humbly.

If Pascal’s Wager is “believe out of fear,” Flad’s Wager is “behave out of hope.”

Friends, as we celebrate Trinity Sunday, we remember that, while the way we name God has ramifications, it will always be inadequate. In all, this truth remains: God invites us to love other human beings in the same way that we are loved by God – that is, by loving our neighbors as our selves. No matter how we name God, this is the deepest lesson for us on this Trinity Sunday. How we name things shapes how we behave. And so, it is my fervent prayer this week that in your minds both “Trinity” and “church” will be synonyms for love.

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Psalm 29, Isaiah 6:1-8
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