

Trinity A: Genesis 1 and Matthew 28
Church of the Good Shepherd
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God is an Amateur

Back in 1675, just nine years after the terrible London Fire devastated so much of that city, Sir Christopher Wren laid the cornerstone of what was to be his most ambitious undertaking—the rebuilding of St Paul's Cathedral. If you've ever been to London, you know what a truly monumental undertaking that was. Wren worked on the project for over 35 years, and the experts say he poured more of his genius into that building than any other building he ever designed. When the project was finally completed, and Wren was a very old man, he personally conducted the then-reigning monarch, Queen Ann, on an extensive tour through the whole structure. When it was over, he waited with baited breath for her reaction. In typical British brusqueness, she summed up her feelings with three adjectives: "It is awful. It is artificial. It is amusing."

Can you imagine how the old builder must have felt when he heard that, when the one person whose opinion he valued the most described the "magnum opus" of his life as awful, artificial and amusing? Well, according to a biographer, upon hearing the queen's words, Wren let out an audible sigh of relief, sank to his knees, and thanked her majesty for her graciousness.

Why on earth would he do *that*? Well, it's because the meanings of words often change over time. You see, back in 1710, those words the queen used meant something very different from what they mean to us today. The word "awful" meant "awe-inspiring," the word "artificial" meant "artistic," and the word "amusing" meant "amazing."

Words are like little children that way—always in motion and almost never still for very long, always changing. Which is, incidentally, why we have to keep on re-translating Scriptures and reformulating our liturgies, what we say in worship, because words change. Like everything else, words exist in a world where it seems like the only thing that does not change is change itself.

And what has happened to words like awful and artificial and amusing has also happened to another English word, the term *amateur*. As we use it in today's speech, amateur is what we call a person of limited competence. The amateur is the opposite of a professional, and carries the implication of a person without much skill or training. They may even be something of a bumbler.

However, this was not what the word meant originally. Our word amateur comes from the Latin root *amare*, which is the verb "to love." In its original intent, an amateur was a person who did whatever she or he did out of love. An amateur was not paid to do something, nor coerced by any external force. The reason why such a person did something was what we might call "positive intentionality," that is, for no other reason than they wanted to and were able to do it and found it their joy to do so.

In its original sense, then, we could go so far as to describe God as an amateur. In fact, this is precisely what we get from the first chapter of Genesis. If you read those lyric lines as the poetry they were meant to be, the image comes through of a God who is the source of life who wants to share that life with others. You can almost hear God saying to himself: "This aliveness that I'm enjoying, this wonderful power to be and to do, this goodness and beauty—it is simply too good to keep to myself. I want others to enjoy it with me. I want the delight of aliveness to be a shared experience."

This story, this hymn, thus offers an answer to that most ultimate of all questions: "Why something and not nothing? Where did everything come from and why?" Genesis answers that it is so because of a Creative Power who is in the deepest sense of the word an "Amateur;" that is, He does what He does out of love and so has acted, created, brought into being that which was not, and gave that being order and beauty. God didn't have to do that, didn't have to make anything. No one forced him. He didn't bring creation into being for some other purpose, to make a profit or to gain anyone else's approval. God didn't need creation. Rather, he made it out of love, out of generosity. "Let us call something out of nothing, cause light to shine in darkness, take the chaos and step-by-step shape it into increasing forms of beauty and meaning." And the whole process climaxes with a refrain that echoes throughout the whole chapter - and God looked on what He had created and said, "It is good, it is very, very good."

It's like a little child who delights in a piece of art she just made, saying to no one in particular, "Look at what I made. Isn't it beautiful? Isn't it wonderful?" All of this, of course, is precisely what lies behind the original meaning of this word amateur, someone who does what they do out of love, out of sheer delight in giving, in sharing.

In our modern language, to call God an amateur might sound like a slight, but in the original sense of the word, it gives us a glimpse into the very heart of the Eternal and helps us see that everything that exists in the world goes back to the Generosity that acted as He did for the sheer joy of it. God called all things into being, not in order to get something for Himself, but rather to give something of Himself. Indeed, describing God as an amateur in the original sense helps us to understand who God *is*, not just how God acts, but who God is in God's essence. God is in his very being a lover, a giver. That is in fact what is conveyed when we say that God is Trinity, that God is a Communion of Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These divine Persons don't exist apart from each other, as self-contained entities, and they don't depend on each other for their being, as if they should be thought of as "parts" of God. Rather, they have a relationship that has been described as a circle of giving, where each Person gives of himself to another.

Since we've been talking about words, this relationship is called by the early Church Fathers *circumincessio* in Latin and *perichoresis* in Greek. Both of which suggests a kind of inter-penetration, a participation of the Three in each other. The idea is that this mutual, self-giving love shared by the Trinity is a love that cannot be self-contained. It overflows from one Person to the next and back again. The Father pours himself out into the Son. The Son pours himself out into the Spirit. And the Spirit returns that love to the Father. In this love, the Father and Son and the Spirit are intertwined like dancers moving to the music of the Spirit. Each of the partners in this dance is perfectly affirming, perfectly giving, perfectly loving...perfect amateurs.

Even more remarkable is the fact that God, who needs no other partner, who is perfectly content, needing no one else to love, for there are already three Persons involved, nevertheless this God invites *us* to share in the dance. This just shows how the nature of the Trinity is to reach out, to share. The Father is always reaching toward and talking to the Son, and the Son is always speaking and reaching to the Father, and the Holy Spirit is always reaching toward us to bring us, indeed all reality, into the life and love of God.

To be sure, if this were not so, if God *needed* us to believe and follow him, if God's existence was dependent on us being one way or another, God would not have been so patient or merciful with us as He has been. He would have long ago invaded our planet by force or given up on us all together. That He has continued to work with us so patiently on the original terms of creation is a powerful sign that He really is an Amateur, not in the sense of being an inept bumbler, but in the sense of doing what He does for the love of it, for the love of us, because God wants us to share in the love that is shared between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

This is how I think we should read Jesus' final instructions in our gospel lesson this morning. Jesus tells the apostles to go and make disciples, baptizing them "in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." In this "Great Commission," Jesus is telling us that baptism is not only for the forgiveness of sins, but it is also the means by which we participate in the life shared by the Trinity. In baptism, in being baptized in God's triune name, we are invited and drawn into the self-giving love that is God.

This may sound kinda mystical and esoteric, but being taken into this life has all the importance in the world to how we live, particularly with how we live with each other, in our families, with our neighbors and with others in church. In fact, one of the most ethically formative things that the Church asks us to do is to be a Christian in community with others, with others we did not know before joining the church and who, when we get to know them, we may not particularly like! The church, the local congregation, is the place where this self-giving, self-emptying dance gets lived out, as we work out how to love people we have difficulty loving, whom God has stuck us with.

It is in the church that we learn how to love Joe who always has some criticism to make, Wilson who expects his contribution to buy him a say in the decision-making, Gertrude who refuses to give up the chair of the committee, and Edith who just can't get over the fact that it is no longer in the 1950s. And here we know too that they are being asked to love *us* with all our vices. The God we know as the Trinity models for us how to deal with such people, and how we hope they will deal with us. For in the Trinity, that communion of amateurs, we see how distinct persons can live together in mutual love and devotion. It shows us the sort of life we are called to live, the life that God invites us into, not just with God, but with each other, as we make room in the circle for others.

Here we see how the Trinity is not in the end just some abstract and irrelevant theory about the nature of God, but in fact is concerned with God's very life with us and our life with each other. If the heart of the Christian life is to be united with God, then the Trinity shows us what that union is like, and what it means to be a part of it, to be amateurs with God. And so on this Trinity Sunday, as with everyday, we give thanks to God for God's revelation of himself as the Holy Trinity and we proclaim, Blessed be God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit! Amen.