

• *We are a very liberal and theologically progressive congregation with an exceedingly wide interpretation of the Trinity – from those who believe in Jesus as Christ, fully human and fully divine, to those who question and may no longer believe in a literal interpretation of the Trinity. How would you preach to and engage a congregation such as ours, most of whom share very liberal beliefs, but includes those whose beliefs are more conservative?*

Folks need to understand that a literal interpretation of the biblical text is just that: **an interpretation**, one of many different ways of appropriating these sacred stories. I have found two books to be helpful in this regard: Marcus Borg's *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogma for a more authentic Christian faith*, and James Fowler's *Stages of Faith*. I would do a series of sermons or book studies so we could explore our faith journeys together.

Borg's contrast of the pre-Easter and post-Easter Jesus explains how the Jesus of history became the Christ of faith, without necessarily undermining our Christian tradition or the early church understanding of *God in Three Persons, Blessed Trinity*. The Greek word for person is more like that of a mask or persona. The mystery of the trinity defies any easy description or definition, Creator/Parent, Christ, Spirit, but the more we engage one another in the mission of being the body of Christ in the world, the less we have to worry about needing to comprehend the totality of the divine life.

Fowler's discussion of the stages of one's faith journey, from the earliest stirrings of the call to discipleship when our understandings tend to literalism, to a mature faith that embraces more questions than answers, is helpful for being comfortable with tensions and ambiguities about the mystery of God. Having an understanding of the process, much like the stages in grief work, can enlighten folks without being condescending about where one is on their own path. *Orthopraxis* (right actions) can then replace *orthodoxy* (right beliefs) as the focus for the person of faith

In our current context of ministering among the Navajo people, they understand the Great Spirit, the teachings of Jesus, and call upon *Diyin* God when they pray to the Creator. This understanding has been helpful to other Navajos who either practice their own spiritual traditions or are members of the Native American Church, who use peyote as their sacrament. Most Navajo Christians were taught by the early missionaries that they had to give up their culture and spiritual traditions in order to be truly Christian. Currently, most mainline denominations encourage folks to appropriate Christianity in the context of their own culture, this is *good news* to folks who have only experienced the judgmental theology of religious fundamentalism.

What my husband and I have discovered in five years of working with the Navajo and various church groups coming out for their mission trips (many of whom have left their respective denominations over issues of sexuality), is that when folks work together for the good of the people, theological and ideological differences no longer matter. Working side by side with a common goal enables real dialogue and true community to happen. The body of Christ in the world!

Finally, undergirding it all, there must be a context of trust and pastoral care. One of the things I used to tell my seminary students is that the members of your congregation will **not care how much you know, they want to know how much you care!** If you take the time to build that as a basic foundation in your church, people will listen to you say just about anything!

I actually have a pretty good sermon on the history of the doctrine of the trinity, from the Nicene Creed, the Apostles Creed showing how this doctrine evolved over time—and ending up with our Brief Statement of Faith (1983) in the Book of Confessions. The point is that our theology evolves over time, like our religious consciousness. Whether it was the Barman Declaration in which the confession churches in Germany took a stand against Hitler, or the confession of 1967 during the Civil Rights Movement, our church has tried to teach all that Christ commanded and be a prophetic voice for our time.

I also have a skit for Reformation Sunday that I usually have confirmands act out in worship called, “the game of the century”. Performed like a football game, it is all about the Council of Chalcedon in 451 (when Jesus became God), when the Antiochans and the Alexandrians were fighting it out over whether Jesus’ humanity or divinity would win the day! Like any good rivalry (e.g., Michigan and Ohio State...), it was serious and intense, with excommunications going back and forth until it was finally decided. Nobody likes a tie, but in order to prevent a blood bath, it was decided that Christ was one person, but had two natures, the divine and the human.

These types of educational events help folks understand that early Christianity was always multi-cultural, and never appropriated in the same way in different contexts. It wasn’t until the 4th century when Constantine wanted to unify the empire, that he declared there was only ONE way to think about the Christ event, but it was for political reasons, and all others were soon excommunicated and labeled as heretics!

In answering your question, I would say that education, faith formation and building relationships of trust is how I preach, teach and minister to a wide variety of theological perspectives. I am excited to know there are churches like Southminster who can proclaim progressive Christianity, but are inclusive enough for folks with literal interpretations of Scripture. We all have our own path to the divine life, and *God alone is Lord of conscience!*

(Note: My husband, who is a very progressive ELCA pastor, was raised in the Missouri Synod, and he therefore has a gift for helping more conservative folks engage the mytho-poetic language we find in scripture!)