

Trinity Sunday, Year B  
June 7, 2009

Trinity Episcopal Church  
Sonoma, CA

What's in a Name:  
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

What do we all have in common—we here in this room? What do we share? Some might say, “We all live in Sonoma.” But I wonder is that true? I know that there are members of our parish living in Glen Ellen, Santa Rosa, even American Canyon. And there may well be visitors here today. Maybe even people who live in other states or other countries.

Perhaps it's that we're all Episcopalians. But I'm not even sure about that. Last week a Presbyterian was sitting two rows from the back.

I know one thing we all have in common. We all have a name—a name we've been given or name we've picked out ourselves.

Where did your name come from? Was it one handed down from generation to generation? Or were you named for someone popular at the time you were born? I understand that a lot of babies born in the last year bear the name Barack.

Maybe you are named for character trait your parents wanted to instill in you. I once worked with a woman named “Hope.” A childhood friend was named “Joy.”

My great grandmother named my grandfather “Howard” after the Civil War general who founded Howard University. She was a civil rights activist long before the term was even coined.

Some folks go by a nickname—a name given to them by friends or family.

You'd be surprised at the many different ways folks get their names.

There's so much more to a name than just what meets the eye. There's history in our names—in the choosing of them and in the living into them.

I've been thinking a lot about names this week. Perhaps because this is Trinity Sunday—the day we celebrate the name our parish bears, the name our forbearers chose for us. Trinity Sunday—our patronal feast day.

I've been wondering, “Why did they choose Trinity?” Why not St. Margaret or St. Alban or St. Bede? Why name a parish after a doctrine? What were those people thinking a hundred years ago?

Perhaps they wanted to set themselves apart. Perhaps they sought to distinguish themselves from the Unitarians down the street. Maybe they said to themselves, “We’re Trinitarians, by golly, and we’re mighty proud of it.”

Perhaps they were caught in the midst of some raging debate over the nature of God and wanted to plant themselves firmly on the side of the Triune God—you know that God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit—Three in one, one in three.

Or maybe it wasn’t a theological question at all. Maybe one of our forbearers came from a Trinity Church somewhere else. Maybe one of our founding mothers or fathers remembered a Trinity Church where they came to know and love God and wanted to see such a church planted in Sonoma. Kind of like my great grandmother wanting to instill a thread of civil rights activism in her son and thus naming him after an activist.

There could be a really simple answer to this question. Perhaps our forbearers chose the name “Trinity” because the cathedral in our diocese is named Trinity. After all, it doesn’t hurt to honor the folks who support you.

But I like to think something else was at work. I like to believe God’s wisdom was at work in the naming of Trinity Sonoma. Think about what the notion of the Trinity says about the God we worship, the God we love, the God in whose image we are made.

The Trinity—it says that God is so much more than just one thing. God—whose spirit moves over the waters, bringing form and substance where there was nothingness and void; God, who comes to us as one of us sharing our sorrows and our joys, our pains and our laughter; God, whose spirit moves within us as we pray “with sighs too deep for words.” Our God can’t be limited to just one thing. And our forbearers were wise enough to know that .

The theologian W. Paul Jones talks of “...the Triune God as source, companion, and goal,...as midwife and mother...as incarnate companion, as wedded lover and friend, And as...estatic fullness of being—coming, coming, ever coming”<sup>1</sup> washing over us—a fountain of living water.

Think of it—our forbearers naming our community after source, companion and goal—after the triune God: midwife, mother, lover, friend, always and forever in the process of coming and becoming. Generative, creative, dynamic.<sup>2</sup>

I think that our forbearers were saying something really important about seeking God, knowing God, and following God. I suspect that they had more than an inkling that it is in and through community—the community of the Trinity—that the path to God leads. I think they knew deep in their bones that we come to know God the son—the human face of God--as we encounter God in the person sitting next to us. I’m sure they witnessed the life-giving power of God in the multitude

of ways they gave life to one another—a question here, a pat on the back there, a leg up when they could give it—the little ways folks bring possibilities to birth in those they meet along the way.

Think of it—our community named after the triune God bound in loving relationship with God's very self—life-giver, son, and spirit God. Like lovers or friends who come to know themselves in and through the love of the other. How did Wesley put it—"Love divine, all loves excelling bound in wonder, love and praise."<sup>3</sup>

What a legacy! What a challenge!

Trinity—a name we can be proud of. A name we can live into. A name that calls us into relationship with one another and with God. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>1</sup>W. Paul Jones, "Trinitarian Thoughts on Descending into the Grand Canyon," <http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/art1992/v49-3-article/htm>

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ruth E. Duck, "Praising the Triune God: Beyond Gender?" <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=314>