

Trinity Sunday: Threeness

Trinity Sunday: the day which our liturgical calendar calls on us to consider the Triune nature of God. It seems that as ministers of Word and Sacrament we are called on to explain the unexplainable. From the readings which I have done this week, it seems a fairly large number of commentators simply avoid the issue and consider this the first Sunday after Pentecost. Yet the doctrine of the Trinity is fundamental to our professed faith. The Trinity is never explicitly named as such in the gospel accounts. God is never referred to as the Triune God within Scripture itself. The gospel accounts record the life and ministry of Jesus as well as his death and resurrection. Jesus is recognized by some in the accounts as the Son of God, although he calls himself the Son of Man. In that record, they tell us that Jesus prayed to God as Abba, Father and taught his disciples to do the same. In that record we also have Jesus' promise that when he ascended again into heaven he would send the Holy Spirit to be with us. In Acts and in the various Epistles which Paul and others wrote, God is portrayed under three names, but considered one. The Hebrew Scriptures talk of God the creator; they speak of how God's spirit moved over the waters, or how God was found in the wind. The breath of God was the giver of life. Having all these elements, the early church fathers tried to understand the nature of God, the Holy One of Israel who appeared to them in various ways. Thus the doctrine of the Trinity was created to explain a mystery. In the Institutes of the Christian Religion written in the 1500's, Calvin talks of the Trinity as the Threeness of the One and as the Oneness of the Three. These are descriptions of the revelation found in Scripture, but I am not sure if they clarify anything. And I am sure that somewhere along the line either in worship as a children's sermon or in Sunday school you have heard the analogies of water, ice and steam—one substance, two molecules of hydrogen combined with one of oxygen—which can exist in three forms. Or perhaps, you have seen a three leafed clover pointed out as three parts making one whole. Or perhaps an apple or other fruit is used to show the skin, the fleshy part and the seeds. The list seems to be endless of ways we have tried to illustrate the nature of God—and really they don't measure up to the reality of the Trinity. Because at the heart of the matter—the nature of God is a mystery that is far greater than any human minds—even those of the most astute theologians—have ever been able to resolve. In the opening of John we are told that in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. This implies not one being that is changing form, but one being that was also two distinct ones. The poetry is beautiful, but our minds just cannot absorb what this is truly like. When Jesus prayed to the Father, he was addressing God's self not changing into a different form. In the passage from Romans which I read earlier, you also have the Trinity given distinct names—we are heirs of God, joint heirs with Christ and are led by the Spirit of God. The earliest believers and followers of Christ did not try to explain it—they just knew it was true by faith. But creatures that we are, we want to define everything—even the indefinable. The description of the Trinity which has captured the essence of the concept for me is found under a Greek term—*peri-chor-esis*—a term which indicates an intimate union, a mutual indwelling or a mutual inter-penetration—of the distinct members of the Trinity with each other. It is still a mystery, but it at least attempts to describe the inter-relationship and presence of Father, Son and Holy Spirit

together. It seems to present the Trinity as a circle where the parts are so interconnected as to be one whole. The inner portion of that circle according to Scripture is love—for God is love. With the revelation of Jesus in John 3:16 that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life we have our inclusion within the circle. God is so much about love that we are invited into the relationship. The lectionary gospel reading from today came from John 3:1-17. It is another place that all the distinct members of the Trinity appear with no use of that label. It is another description of God's relationships within God's self. The conversation Jesus had with Nicodemus illustrates the Trinity—God the Father, source of all that is seen and unseen, Christ the Son, fully divine, fully human, Word of life made flesh, and God the Holy Spirit, comforter, advocate, sustainer—each distinct but not divided. And this God refuses to leave us in the dark, confused and questioning maybe—but not in the dark. We are given the invitation to come into the circle—receiving a spirit of adoption. That is the importance of the revelation of the Triune nature of God. God in God's self is a community—and that is what lies underneath everything. God wants intimate relationships with us—because God all about relationships. Community is a reflection of God's self. This means that at the heart of any discussion about the Trinity you have to discuss relationship. Some theologians postulate that that love was why God created the cosmos and humanity in the first place. God is so full of love that it must be shared in and through profound relationships. God is so full of love that it overflowed and the result was creation so there would be more to love. The Trinity tells us that from the very beginning of time the dynamic power of love is at the heart of God's identity and character. The only way to even dimly capture that identity is by thinking of love that is shared. God's essential and core being has always been a giving and receiving and sharing of love that finally spills out into the whole of the universe and invites all of us into the circle of love. Relentlessly from the beginning through creation and a series of covenants God has pursued community with creation. Pre-eminently in the sending of God's Son to demonstrate in word and deed just how much God loves us, we have seen this love revealed. Now the Holy Spirit comes and bears witness to God's ongoing love for us and all creation. As recipients of that love, we are called to be in relationship with God—but also since the love is so abundant and overflowing we are called to be in community with one another. According to the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans, being made co-heirs with Christ—receiving the adoption into the circle of God's love—had consequences. Paul says that it should make a difference in daily living. Verse 15 states: "For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption." Rather than being afraid—of the future, of what people may think or say of us, of our status, of our standing with God—Paul invites us instead to imagine a life of courage, the courage of those who have been adopted by God and invited into the full measure of God's blessings and riches. We are unconditionally loved, beloved children, adopted and chosen and named as part of God's family. God revealed as the Trinity has room to add an infinite number of one's into the circle. When we consider the Triune nature of God, it is also an invitation to think about our relationships and the communities we form. Three is an interesting number when considering relationships. We as human beings are not usually comfortable as one, being alone is not natural to us. We were created to be in relationship as God pointed out in Genesis. Our world seems to operate in, usually prefers things to be done with even numbers---pairs, and multiples of two are the norm. Even numbers seem to secure a certain sense of order and

predictability. In any grouping of three, add the odd person in, and as the saying goes it is the odd person out. Threesomes seem to change the relational dynamics. All of a sudden prospected patterns of behavior, anticipated actions are no longer as easy to predict. There is a disquieting disequilibrium. You are forced to share a conversation, to be attentive to more than one other. You have to listen to more than one person, perhaps at the same time. You have to respond to feelings and responses and reactions that have doubled. That is the promise and problem of three. Yet God chose to express God's self with three, in three, and through three. I think this also says something about God's nature and how we should view the Trinity. It seems that God likes disequilibrium. God often choose to act in unexpected ways. Perhaps that is God's point. God embraces and invites imbalance because that is what relationships are all about. It is easy to focus on one thing that is right in front of us. One on one is a lot simpler than one on two. That takes more work. It could be that for God's self-revelation that the commitment to three was necessary—an expression that is secured but surprising; known but intangible; revealed but complex. God infinite and eternal, revealed but hidden whose steadfast love endures forever; God who draws us closer through mystery and majesty. God lives in community within God's self and with us. God desires us to live in faith and trust with what has been revealed so that we are in community with God and with others in an infinite circle of love. Thanks be to God for revelation, for mystery and for faith. Amen.