

Trinity: The Divine Dance

Trinity Sunday, it appears on the church calendar every year the Sunday after Pentecost. It is a day when pastors and teachers within the church are forced to wrestle with the mystery of what it means to speak of the Triune God, three in one. Last week liturgically we moved from the white of Easter to the rare red of Pentecost. But instead of moving forward to the ubiquitous green of ordinal, or ordinary time, here we are this morning back into white—and the Communion Table is not prepared for the Sacrament. Liturgically white represents something important, something special in the life of the church. This is a Sunday when we address not an event, but a theological concept.—And most if not all congregations and church leaders alike find themselves uncomfortable with this topic. Some choose to simply overlook the theology, proclaim it a mystery and move on. Some find themselves using symbols or illustrations which have a place in the children's Sunday school class—the classics of water, ice and steam or the three leaf clover. But they truly do not address what is meant by the Trinity. The title of this sermon comes from a book by Richard Rohr with that title that a friend recommended to me. The image of the trinity as dance partners moving together, separate but moving as a unit was one I first encountered in Seminary—it is also an imperfect image, but one that is rooted in some of the writings of the early church fathers. That Greek term for that image is peri-choresis—and it encompasses something important—through this term God is not seen as a distant, static monarch but as a participant in a divine circle dance. God is the Holy One whose presence exists in the dynamic and loving action of Three. This does not immediately clear up the mystery of the Trinity itself, but it does point out that this idea is central to our understanding of God. It also shows why the Trinity should not be overlooked by individuals as something for theologians to ponder. The Doctrine of the Trinity proclaims the truth that the God we worship is, in fact, the Triune God, three-in-one, a God of reciprocity and relationship, expansiveness and welcome, very much still at work in the world creating, redeeming, sustaining and still speaking to this world. There are some very profound statements about the nature of the Trinity. There are entire books devoted to the doctrine. William C. Placher wrote one entitled "The Triune God". That sounds like it would offer the ultimate answer...and it does offer some insights. However, it does not dispel the mystery. Neither for me did it enlighten what I feel we most need to understand. Jill Duffield, editor of Outlook Magazine, cited this work in her weekly commentary for today. The quote she cited was this: "In the incarnation, the three show there is always a space large enough for the whole world, and even all its sin: the Word's (capital W) distance from the one he calls Father is so great that no one falls outside it, and the Spirit (make that Holy Spirit capital S) fills that space with love. The Spirit maintains the space that Christ opens up 'at our disposal, as a new open space.'" I spent quite a bit of time on that statement and found that it did not help me at all. In fact, it seemed to me to border on what once was called a heresy. The heresy was a Trinitarian heresy called Modalism—another theological concept, but one which I think is common among us. Modalism views the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as nothing but three different "modes" by which human beings understand God. That is to say, in reality God-in-God's self is one person, and this one person has simply manifested unitary divinity in three modes—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Those who were or are modalists imagine God is, as it

were, a single person with three faces. The other end of the spectrum are those folks who view God as three distinct persons within the Divine reality, often based on roles that we associate with the Biblical images. Although proclaiming to be monotheists the images are of the Father as Creator; the Son as Redeemer; and the Holy Spirit as Sustainer. This places an emphasis on separateness, on the three persons of the Trinity not being a unit. The question to consider today is whether or not this is theological hair-splitting. Does it really matter what image you have of God as Triune. What implications for relationships does the doctrine of the Trinity have? After all, the term Trinity never actually appears in the Bible. There are the metaphors of Father and Creator, but it is long after the Scriptures are formed into canon that this is named the “First Person of the Trinity.” The Bible speaks eloquently of God’s self-disclosure in the life of Jesus Christ, the Son, but it is only later that Christians name this truth about God “The Second Person of the Trinity.” The Bible speaks of God as the Immediate, as being “The Present-Tense-of God, the Holy Spirit, but again it is only later that Christians name this truth about God’s present tense presence in the world as the “The Third Person of the Trinity.”

Although never Trinity as a word never appears in Scripture, as several of our passages this morning showed, there are several places in the New Testament where Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit are named in one sentence—named together and in relationship with each other. It was this relational nature found in Scripture which led to the Doctrine of the Trinity. Why it matters to us is found in this description of relatedness. As Christians we declare ourselves to be monotheists. We believe in One God. But...a monotheistic picture of God can be an image of God as a Being locked in a self-contained, austere, unloving, insulated singularity. God as one can picture God, the very Center of Meaning, as well...cold, distant. Singularities don’t have relationships. Singularities don’t care. Singularities don’t love. Singularities don’t connect. So if we pursue the idea of three in one—not as three separate identities but as a unit of three but avoid the modality issue, what understanding do we gain? We then understand that though God is one, this oneness is not austere, disconnected and unloving; rather we understand that God is actually within God’s self community and relationship. We began worship this morning singing “Holy, Holy, Holy, LORD God Almighty which declares God in three Persons, Blessed Trinity. It declares God is merciful and mighty, perfect in power in love and purity. Trinitarian doctrine summarizes the Biblical narrative of God who creates the world and humanity out of caring and longing for relationship. The God of Scripture pursues relationship. God the Father creates a creation to love, enters history to speak to and love Israel in the drama which unfolds in Hebrew Scripture. God the Redeemer reaches out in love to us in Jesus Christ, a human person like us. God the Sustainer is present with us in the Holy Spirit. This approaches the core of the doctrine: not only does God reach out to humanity for relationship, God actually is relationship. The God we know from sacred history, the God who reveals God’s self to us; the God with whom we relate, must by definition be an outward extension of the internal divine reality. It only makes sense and can be summarized by adapting a familiar saying: God is as God does. Not only does God love, but as the gospel of John tells us God IS love. The mystery of the Trinity is a God who is love, a God who is relationship, a God who is communion. I began talking about the book the Divine Dance. The foreword to Rohr’s book begins with a poem that is very much to the point about the importance of the Trinity to

our understanding of God's eternal nature. A copy of the poem is on the insert in your bulletin. It draws some images of numerical conditions. It reads like this:

ONE alone

is not by nature Love,
or Laugh,
or Sing

ONE alone

may be Prime Mover,
Unknowable
Indivisible
All

and if Everything is All and All is One

One is Alone
Self-Centered
Not Love
Not Laugh
Not Sing

TWO

Ying/Yang
Dark/Light
Male/Female
contending Dualism
Affirming Evil/Good
And striving toward Balance
At best Face-to-Face
But Never Community

THREE

Face-to-Face-to-Face
Community
Ambiguity
Mystery
Love for the Other
And for the Other's Love

Within

Other-Centered
Self-Giving
Loving
Singing
Laughter
A fourth is created
Ever-loved and loving.

This poem is about the Trinity, but in some aspects it is about relationships. We are told in Genesis that we are made in God's image—and part of that image may be our desire to be in community—to love and to care—which cannot really be done alone, and often when a pair forms and isolates itself from others, conflict arises. When the relationship expands to include others—a fourth is created—a community. Throughout Scripture God urges us to care for one another; to show love; to be in community. At the end of the day, whether or not I understand the doctrine of the Trinity or not, some things I do know: God desires to be in relationship with each of us—that God loves and cares for us and desires for us to extend love to others. The two passages from the New Testament for today are last words of love; they are benedictions, instructions and blessings: Paul's and Jesus Christ's. In 2nd Corinthians Paul tells his brothers and sisters to put things in order and to agree with one another; they are to live in peace with each other. Then Paul pronounces the Triune blessing of grace, love and communion. The Risen Christ tells the eleven to go to all nations—the instruction is expansive, unlimited; not bounded by any earthly category we may have constructed to divide. Go to all nations, baptizing in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teaching also, all that Jesus has commanded is also included. There is that expansive "all" again. No one and nothing is left out. At the heart of the doctrine of the Trinity is the belief that God is inherently and irreducible both communal and loving. One God in three persons whose shared, mutual and sacrificial love spills out into the world and all its inhabitants. As followers of the Triune God we are called to be and do the same. And one last word—Christ's final instructions to the disciples which we are given in Matthew also contains a promise—"And I am with you always, to the end of the age." Thanks be to God. Amen.