

Can't Explain It

What I can't explain is the doctrine known as the Trinity, the doctrine which gives this Sunday the name found on our liturgical calendar. It amazes me that we think we can explain the mysteries we find within our faith...those things too amazing to understand; the love which underlies all that God has revealed to us about God's own self. The Trinity is a doctrine; a concept which is not named anywhere in scripture but has come together based on scriptures like the passage from John's gospel and Romans which were just read. Other scriptures attest to the same truths. A doctrine is a teaching and a belief thought to be a true statement drawn from scripture. Although Trinity as a word or concept does not appear within gospel accounts or the Epistles as a stated truth, within all of them, each of the named members in the doctrine of the Trinity are mentioned and given roles described within the interactions between God and God's claimed people. It is from those statements and revelations that the doctrine was drawn. It seems rather funny that we, the created being, think we can define and understand the being who created us. It is somewhat analogous to the arrogance which led to the building of the Tower of Babel described in Genesis that we try to explain everything we encounter, probably under the impression if we can pin down and describe it, we can then control it. Most people who claim the name and profess to be Christian in our modern cultural landscape accept and use the ritualistic formula: "in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit". This is done often in worship without trying to understand the importance or meaning of what scripture is telling us which led to the formulation of the doctrine. If this unthinking acceptance is the case, then two questions arise: why does this concept continue to be so important that we use it so frequently and what could it possibly have to do with us now? Attempts to explain this doctrine, especially in a Sunday morning sermon usually results in the use of esoteric theological terms like immanent or transcendent or perhaps the Greek term describing this relationship as perichoresis, a dance of intertwined members whose love overflowed to create the world. A fellow pastor like the image of computer generated fractal images while more traditionally the clover is used to demonstrate three parts of one whole which Calvin described as the Oneness of the Three or the Threeness of the One. Mostly, these things don't actually explain much and are at least somewhat confusing. But one image from scripture has endured: the relational nature of the members of the Godhead. The church professes that members of the Trinity are deeply linked in a mutual relationship of love, service, sacrifice and dependence. It is in that consistent image of interrelationship and interdependence that we find the meaning which God so wants us to understand and embrace. Within the text from Romans we find a call into a deepened understanding of interdependent relationship. All three persons named in the Trinity are present in this passage which describes these persons existing in relationships flowing in and out of one another. Followers of Jesus, the Anointed One, know God's peace through Jesus. They know God's love through the Holy Spirit as the Holy Spirit pours God's love into their hearts. The relationships described in Romans are not just ones among the three Persons of the Godhead. There is also a description of God's relationship to God's people which invites them into interrelationship. And it is the interdependent relationship within the Godhead which provides an example for humanity's interdependent relationship with God. God not only extends the relationship to the believers but there is also the hope within Romans that believers of many different cultures can come together and share in the relationship as

they are made “right” with God. The vocabulary used in John’s gospel underscores the close connection between these three members of the Godhead. Jesus reveals the Father through his earthly ministry and teachings while the Spirit as Advocate comes to continue the revelation by revealing Jesus as the Father’s true representative on earth. In John’s gospel when Jesus identified himself as the “way” and the “truth”, the translation of the Greek we see as way is best translated as guide. So Jesus has come to be our guide into relationship with the Father and the Spirit’s role is to guide us to the revelations found in Jesus’ life and ministry—the truth of God’s eternal love for all. If we concentrate on this guidance given in our scriptures about relationships, then we come closer to understanding the meaning and relevance of the Trinity for our own lives. In the preface to the wonderful book, *The Triune God: An Essay on Postliberal Theology* by William Placher, he wrote; “If, however, as I believe, we can know God only as revealed in Christ through the Holy Spirit, then we start with three.” This statement describes how we come to know God. It is Jesus that is God’s self-revelation about God’s own nature and desire for relationship, and it is only through the Holy Spirit’s action that enables us to believe. In other words, no matter that we can’t exactly explain it, the Trinity isn’t some esoteric doctrine but the core of our faith—the Trinity is the God we know and the God who knows and loves us. In 2004, the Presbyterian General Assembly presented what is known as a “theological working paper” based on a study of the doctrine of the Trinity. This was an effort to encourage more thought and reflections on the importance of the Trinity to our faith journeys. Here are lines 157-161 from that report: “According to the witness of scripture, God’s love comes to us in a threefold way: God loved the world and gave the Son for our salvation; Jesus Christ, God’s only Son our Lord, loved us and gave his life for us; the gift of God’s love in Christ has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Our doctrine and confession and praise of the Triune God is rooted in this threefold self-revelation of the one God who is our creator, redeemer, and our sanctifier.” Notice again, the Trinity isn’t about God being obtuse; it is about God revealing God’s self to the world. It most certainly holds up the mystery of God and our inability to know God fully, but what is revealed is extremely important. It tells us that “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: as a unit is trustworthy; God’s eternal character and actions are founded in God’s love for us. Revealed to us through these declarations is our access to grace and hope because of that love God has poured into our hearts. Trinity Sunday also offers a powerful corrective to our cultural propensity to laud lone rangers, justify blatant selfishness and to celebrate self-interest above caring for others and all that lives. Trinity Sunday gives us a proclamation to make to the world about the Spirit given truth about how the world should be; about our loving, generous, merciful, creative, collaborating, poured out for the sake of the world God who shapes and sends people to do likewise. While we may say with the eleven in John’s gospel who heard Jesus speak that we do not understand; that does not matter. Because God’s sending of the Spirit of Truth is not dependent upon us; upon our understanding. The gift of the Spirit will not be taken away from us—even in the times we are least able to trust, understand or persevere. For Father, Son and Spirit of Truth witness to one truth, all of which we cannot see, but all of which we dare to trust because God is at work for us, revealing righteousness here and preparing a place suitable for each and all of us in the fullness of God’s reign. We may not like this inability to fully understand; there are many events in our lives and world which leave questions we want answered sooner than the time

Paul refers to when we will see “clearly, no in a dim mirror.” Scriptures are full of those who have had questions like mine, not understanding the events around them but God always revealed his presence with them. The Trinity is a practical doctrine which describes the attributes of our God; which reveals that God is love above all else and all other descriptions. This also has a radical consequence for our Christian life because it is the specific way Christians speak about God and what it means to participate in the life of God through Jesus Christ in the Spirit. The Trinity is about relationship and indwelling, about community and interrelationship. It is about collaboration and the self-communication of God to us about what is important. The Trinity is about the mutuality of God within the Godhead, about our invitation into that mutuality by Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit. And finally it is about our mutuality with each other, guiding, speaking, and declaring to one another the truths of our interrelationship through our belonging to our God. No, I can’t explain it. I can only be thankful for the revelations. I can also witness to what it teaches me about God. That God loves me and all others and calls me to do likewise. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, One God in Three Persons, blessed Trinity.