

Three in One, One in Three

John 16:12-15, Romans 5:1-5

Trinity Sunday, May 22, 2016

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I was about to join the church – be confirmed. I was excited – I had grown up in that congregation, and though I did not always want to go to every worship service my parents dragged me to, I loved it. Plus, I had worked hard in my confirmation class. I had memorized all the books in the Bible and the Apostle’s Creed – the old fashioned way – where we professed that Jesus will come judge the *quick* and the dead. I had even outlined a sermon the preacher delivered one Sunday (not a bad practice – just saying), and I had written my statement of faith.

Now all that was left was the lunch with Session. I met one of my friends, Michelle, in the parking lot and we walked in together. “I’m kind of nervous,” she told me. Nervous? Why was she nervous? Was there something to be nervous about? Michelle shared that her older brother, who had been confirmed a couple of years earlier, had told her that the Session wasn’t just meeting with us – it was an EXAMINATION by the Session. The elders could ask us anything; they could even ask us to explain the doctrine of the Trinity.

I became nervous. Sure I had heard about the Trinity – God is three and God is one – I didn’t really get the math – but explain it? In an examination? Luckily, one of the elders at the lunch, I wish I could remember her name, noticed that some of us seemed anxious – more specifically the group that was furiously trying to work up an understanding of the Trinity before dessert was over and we would be “examined.” With a kind voice and gentle countenance, the elder asked if anything was wrong. I blurted out that we just couldn’t explain the doctrine of the Trinity. She smiled and said that no one was going to ask us to, that it was not THAT KIND of examination. I didn’t think much more about the Trinity for quite a long time.

Today is Trinity Sunday, a day when the church celebrates in our liturgy and prayer that God is three in one and one in three: Father – Son - Holy Spirit; Lover – Beloved – Love; King of Glory - Prince of Peace - Spirit of Love; Rock – Redeemer – Friend; light - sun – warmth; Creator – Redeemer – Sustainer. This cornerstone of the Christian faith began, with a dispute in the early church about who Jesus was. Arius of Alexandria taught that God the Father *created* Jesus as his Son, that Jesus was distinct and subservient to the Father, not fully God. Others in the church, led by Athanasius, asserted that no, Jesus was not made, but was with the Father, in unity, made of the same stuff. It was the controversy that led to the formulation of the Nicene Creed. At the Council of Nicaea, Arianism was condemned as a heresy.

There were other heresies about Jesus – that he was just a regular person adopted by God as Son – Adoptionism; that Jesus had a human soul, but a divine mind – Appolinarism; that Jesus only seemed to be human, but that his body was, in fact an illusion – as was his crucifixion - Docetism. And then there was the heresy about the Spirit – that the Spirit was subservient to the Father and the Son – the Macedonians believed that. And there was the heresy of modalism – that heresy has popped up a number of times in Church history - that God is only one, and that differences of Father – Son – and Spirit are only in the eyes of the believer, that they are masks that the one God puts on for us. To all of these heresies and many more, the church through the ages has said, well, no. Sometimes the church has said no with kindness and grace, but more often with vitriole and bloodshed. Through the ages the church has returned to the doctrine of the Trinity: that God is three persons, separate and distinct, but also unified and equal.

At our best, the church has fallen back and said – we can’t fully explain this Trinity stuff. We can start to – but eventually our analogies get pushed too far, the language collapses, and we must fall back and admit that we do not truly understand the Trinity, that it is “a holy mystery.” Looking back on it, the elders examining us when I was confirmed probably had no interest in hearing our understanding of the Trinity, because, well, they likely couldn’t fully articulate it themselves.

But even though when I study, meditate, and think about the Trinity, and eventually return to the confession that it is a holy mystery, one that I will never truly grasp this side of glory; nevertheless, it is a mystery that I cherish, a mystery to which I cling, a mystery that, I believe, is a hope for our faith, for our time. Because at its heart, I believe, the Trinity is about relationship. According to Daniel Migliore, “To confess that God is triune is to affirm that the eternal life of God is personal life in relationship... To confess that God is triune is to affirm that God exists in community... To confess that God is triune is to affirm that the life of God is essentially life-giving love.” (67-70)

Ours is an age that hungers for true, deep, meaningful relationships. Many of us long for others with whom we can truly be ourselves, while they remain truly themselves, and yet where there is between us, among us, a unity, a coming together, a mutuality that does not insist on sameness, but celebrates differences; a caring that supports when there is need but does not limit freedom; a bond that challenges, but does not demean. Some relationships exhibit such health on occasion, and we rightly celebrate and cherish them. We see relationships at their best in a marriage where both are stronger with each other, in a friendship that sustains in difficult times, in a family that nurtures its members to fullness. But most of our relationships, our human relationships, are a mixed lot. Because while we can be self-giving, we can also be self-serving, though we can be compassionate, we can also be manipulative, while we can be funny, sometimes the jokes can sting, though we may be faithful to those we love, we are sometimes intolerant to what we do not understand. We can't help it. As a friend of mine often would say, it comes with the belly button.

But, through God's grace, we are able to be a part of a relationship that is pure wholeness, pure mutuality, pure, self-giving love. As the Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans (5:1-2), “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.” The love among the triune God is one that we are invited to be a share in, and which we are invited to bear witness to in our daily lives. It is already ours. As David Lose wrote, “If we are to believe the biblical drama and its witness to the depths to which God will go to draw us into the Trinitarian embrace, then we might suspect that just as each member of the Trinity is necessary to complete the other two, so also are we necessary to complete the Trinity.”(<https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1540>)

The doctrine of the Trinity, the faith of our church, the faith into which we baptize - it matters. The Trinity is not an obscure piece of trivia to be mastered. There is not going to be an examination at the conclusion of this sermon. But there is an eternal invitation, written by God, sealed by Christ, and delivered to us by the Holy Spirit:

- An invitation to share in the love that flows freely among the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.
- An invitation to enjoy the fullness of the Creation as God intended it to be, and to work for its care and wholeness.
- An invitation to fully live in to the life that God became incarnate in Jesus Christ to give to you.
- An invitation to trust in the Holy Spirit to reveal to you, in your prayer and in your study and in your daily living what new thing God is speaking in your life and doing in the world.

There is an invitation to make the ancient prayer, commonly ascribed to St Patrick of Ireland your own,

“I bind unto myself the Name,
the strong Name of the Trinity,
by invocation of the same,
the Three in One and One in Three,
Of whom all nature hath creation,
Eternal Father, Spirit, Word;
Praise the Lord of my salvation,
Salvation is of Christ the Lord.”
Amen.