

“Three Ways of Loving”  
Sunday, May 30, 2010—Trinity Sunday  
John 16:12-15, Romans 5:1-5  
Rev. Judy Landt, Vernon Presbyterian Church

Today is Trinity Sunday. One of the ways it differs from all the other important days of the Christian calendar is that on each of the other days, we have a great story to tell. At Christmas there is the birth of a baby in a stable. At Easter there is an empty tomb. At Pentecost we have all that wind and fire. Stories are important. They are important because they are memorable—I know people often remember the stories I tell on Sunday morning long after they have forgotten the scriptural point connected with them. Stories help us connect the stories of our lives with the great story of God’s relationship with God’s people.

Alas, Trinity Sunday is different. Today we celebrate not a story, but a doctrine of the church, and a difficult one at that. Today we proclaim that although we worship one God, our God has three ways of being God, ways that we name Father, Son and Holy Spirit. By the way, the doctrine of the Trinity is never explicitly mentioned in Scripture. Committees of early church leaders, who struggled to find the right language to express who God is and how we know God, came up with the Trinity as the way to talk about a God who is present and at work in the world in three ways. It took about four centuries of debate before they got it written down in the Nicene Creed, and even then it went through multiple revisions.

Today our prayers and music especially emphasize the Trinity, but we use trinity language every Sunday to talk about God. Every week when we say our affirmation of faith, we say: “I believe in God the Father almighty...and in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord...I believe in the Holy Ghost.” When we baptize babies, we do so in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit—because that’s what Jesus commanded us to do when he gave us the Great Commission in Matthew 28. In this morning’s Gospel reading from John, Jesus declares to his disciples his oneness with God, saying, “all that the Father has is mine.” And he tells them that after he is gone, they will continue to experience his presence and his love through the Holy Spirit, who will continue to teach and guide them. In Paul’s letter to the church at Rome, he explains that because of Jesus Christ, we have been restored to a right relationship with God and given a sense of peace and confident hope through the Holy Spirit. One God, three ways of loving us and making Godself known to us.

Of course, no one fully understands how God can be one and three at the same time. Our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters, who worship the same God, find the doctrine of the Trinity a stumbling block to their understanding of Christianity; it sounds like three gods to them. Their confusion is compounded by the fact that most Christians can’t talk about this three-in-one business in any way that makes much sense to anyone. Truth to tell, I think most folks today have a hard time connecting with the Trinity.

So it’s interesting, isn’t it, that in this day and age, a book about the trinity has captured the popular imagination and made its way to the best seller list. I’m talking about William Paul Young’s book, *The Shack*. Most of my pastor colleagues with whom I’ve discussed it have been amazed by the number of people in their congregations who showed up to talk about the book, and delighted at the way the book prompted conversation about some pretty deep theological

questions. That's pretty much what happened here, too. Several people told me they'd never made much sense of the trinity before reading this book. It's the story of a man named Mack who has something terrible happen to him and who has an opportunity to meet God face to face to try to make sense of what has happened to him and God's role in it.

The God whom Mack meets is the triune God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But that's where God's familiarity ends and the surprises start. God the Father, who goes by the name Papa, turns out to be a large African American woman. Jesus is a Middle Eastern man with a big nose and a tool belt and muscled forearms. And the Holy Spirit is a small Asian woman who flits about, well, like the wind.

One God. Three ways of being God.

One of the more prevalent misunderstandings about the Trinity is that God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit form a hierarchy. If you were drawing it, you'd draw a triangle with the Father at the top and Jesus and the Holy Spirit below. When we think of God this way, effectively what we are doing is borrowing a model from the corporate world. God is like a powerful CEO with two key vice presidents under his direction. God the Father is the boss who gives the orders, then the Son and the Spirit go and obediently follow the Father's directions.

In *The Shack*, God explains the problem with this understanding of the Trinity in this way: "(The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit) have no concept of final authority among us, only unity. We are in a circle of relationship, not a chain of command...What you are seeing here is relationship without any overlay of power. We don't need power over the other because we are always looking out for (each others') best (interests). Hierarchy would make no sense among us...You humans are so lost and damaged that to you it is almost incomprehensible that people could work or live together without someone being in charge... So you think that God must relate inside a hierarchy like you do. But we do not." (P. 122, 124).

John of Damascus, a Greek theologian who lived in the seventh century, came up with a wonderful image to describe this circle of relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He used the Greek word "perichoresis"—composed of the roots "peri", as in perimeter, meaning around, and "choresis", as in choreography, meaning dancing. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are like three dancers, holding hands, dancing around in an endless, joyful circle. This image is a very helpful way to think about this extraordinary community of three persons who love each other completely and live together in total, self-giving harmony. Notice, this is not some sort of club with members who come together because they have common interests. Nor is the trinity like a single person carrying out different roles, like a family member who is a mother or father when parenting children, an employee while at work, a daughter or son when caring for aging parents, a volunteer when participating in church or community service. The members of the Trinity exist only in their relationship with the others. They cannot decide to give up being Son or Spirit so as to concentrate just on being Father for a while. They are what they are only in relationship to the others. They share all that they have. As Jesus puts it in this morning's Gospel reading, "All that the Father has is mine." The Spirit takes all that they share and declares it to us. Do you hear how the three dance together in a circle of love, living together in full equality, and support?

In the Shack, Young describes a scene in which Father, Son and Holy Spirit are preparing dinner and Jesus manages to drop a bowl of some gooey mess which spreads all over when the bowl breaks. There is no blaming, no fault-finding, no complaining about clumsiness or waste; instead, there is a lot of laughter, followed by Jesus getting down on his knees and cleaning up Papa with a bowl and towel. Mack reflects: Obviously what was truly important here was the love they had for one another and the fullness it brought them. (p. 104-105).

All of this is important for us, not so we can recite the doctrine of the Trinity, which, trust me, no one fully understands, but so we can see that the nature of God is to be in community. Not just a superficial association of like minded friends, but a community marked by the deepest kind of intimacy between those who are different, and yet one. A community based not on the power of some to control and dominate others, but on the power to be loving partners, who live in mutual openness and respect, committed to a common goal and vision.

This is the kind of relationship God wants with us.

And if the true nature of God is fulfilled only in the community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, it follows that it is only in community that we can fulfill our true nature, as human beings created in God's image. In the Shack, Papa tells Mack: "We want to share with you the love and joy and freedom and light that we (the Trinity) already know within ourself." (p.124). The point of being human is not to live as isolated individuals, standing alone and independent and convinced that freedom means doing what we please, serving our own needs and wants and being accountable to no one. To be fully human is to live in community with others, community where power is used not to dominate and control and manipulate, but to serve and empower one another. Rightly understood, this is the kind of community the church is intended to be. How different is that from a lot of the popular understandings of church today, as a place you just go to on Sunday mornings, if the entertainment is good and there's nothing more pressing to do.

The Trinity is good news for all of us. The good news is, we can stop thinking about who's number one, who's looking down on who, and who's justified in resenting those who are higher on the food chain. As the Holy Spirit puts it in Young's book: "Relationships are never about power." (p.106). Instead, we can begin to think, first of God, then of ourselves, as living in the divine community, encircled with God's love, equal partners who dance together in joy and gratitude.

All to God's glory, honor and praise.

Amen.