



Sermon for Trinity Sunday, June 4, 2023

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

Rev. David Owren

Genesis 1:1-2:4a

2 Corinthians 13:11-13

Matthew 28: 16-20

Dear Friends in Christ,

A young girl on a plane was reading her Bible. A businessman was sitting next to her. He looked over to her and said, "You don't really believe that do you?"

And she said, "why yes I do".

And the businessmen then said, "you really believe that Jonah was swallowed up by a whale."

"Well it was actually a big fish" she responded.

"Okay, a big fish. You don't really believe he's in heaven, do you?"

And the young girl responded, "well yes of course I do, and I plan on meeting him there some day."

"Well, what if he isn't there? The businessman replied. "Well then you can meet him" she said.¹

What do you believe? Who do you believe? What difference does it make?

Today is Trinity Sunday, a day to celebrate God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. "It's the only feast day in the entire Church Year which doesn't celebrate a person, like a saint's day...or an event, like Christmas or Easter or Pentecost."² And it is the only feast day on the Christian calendar that celebrates a doctrine, a teaching, a belief.

An integral part of a Christian feast day is affirming what kind of God we believe in the form of a creed, which in Latin means "believe." There are almost 2,000 creeds in the almost 2,000-year history of the Christian Church. Today we declare our faith in the words of the Apostles' Creed, traditionally used for baptisms. Most other Sundays we confess the Nicene Creed. And once a year, on Trinity Sunday, we normally affirm the Athanasian Creed, No matter what creed we use, the Church has always affirmed the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit...One God, with three Persons.

Why do we believe in the Holy Trinity? What does it mean to describe God as one, yet three?

Franciscan priest and theologian Richard Rohr suggests that trying to understand God requires looking at the Trinity in a new way: "Don't start with the One and try to make it into Three," he writes, "Start with the Three and see that this is the deepest nature of the One."³

How would our lives be different if our belief in the Holy Trinity started with the Three? What kind of God would we see?

¹ Source Unknown

² Rt Rev Dean Wolfe, What Kind of Math is This?, May 26, 2013 on day1.org.

³ Richard Rohr, *The Divine Dance*.

One commentator⁴ said: First, we will see that God is dynamic. Three persons means God is always active, always moving. God is always spilling over, always surprising, always calling, always dancing the dance of love.

We don't like change, and we are often reluctant to embrace what is new, what is unfamiliar, what is uncomfortable. But if God's nature is flow and movement and dance, then we need to find the courage to enter that same flow, that same movement, and that same dance.

Second, we will see that God is diverse. If God exists in three persons, then each person has a distinctive way of expressing goodness, beauty, love, and righteousness. The Trinity affirms a plurality of goodness. Goodness must be shared. And "goodness needs contrast and tension, not perfect uniformity."

If God can incarnate goodness through contrast and tension, then it's worth asking why can't we? Or why won't we? Why do we fear difference so much when difference lies at the very heart of God's nature? As churches, communities, and countries, we will not survive unless we learn how to live gracefully and peaceably with difference. We will not heal unless we're honest about our fears, penitent about our prejudices, and unrelenting in our longing for God's diverse nature to be realized in its fullness among us.

Third, we will see that God is communal. The holy trinity is in constant intimacy. When God the Son is baptized, God the Spirit descends in the form of a dove, and God the Father parts the heavens to speak delight and affirmation. The Spirit of God drives the Son of God into the wilderness, for a time of testing and preparation. In the Garden of Gethsemane, the Son of God cries out to God the Father for help and solace. It is God the Father who raises the crucified Son, vindicating his death through resurrection. Throughout the Gospel story, the Three exist **interdependently**, sharing intimacy in a full communion with each other.

If God is interactive at God's very heart — if Three is the deepest nature of the One — then what are we doing when we isolate ourselves from each other? When we decide to go it alone? When we value independence and autonomy over companionship and mutuality? When we prioritize our individual "rights" over our care and concern for the most vulnerable among us?

If the Trinity really is more than a bit of dusty doctrine the early Church fought over, then we dare not take lightly the life-changing power of the communal. God is Relationship, and it is in relationship that we experience and embody God's nature.

Fourth, we will see that God is hospitable. In the 15th century, Russian iconographer Andrei Rublev created "The Hospitality of Abraham," also known as "The Trinity," one of the most well-known and beloved icons in Christendom. In it, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (depicted as the three angels who appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre), sit around a table, sharing food and drink.

Their faces are nearly identical, but they're dressed in different colors. The Father wears gold, the Son blue, and the Spirit green. The Father gazes at the Son. The Son gazes back at the Father, but gestures towards the Spirit. The Spirit gazes at the Father, but points toward the Son with one hand, and opens up

⁴ I am indebted to **Debie Thomas, Minister for Lifelong Formation, St Mark's Episcopal Church, Palo Alto, CA**, for the five point outline of the Trinity. I have edited her essay, retaining some of her remarks and adding my own views.

the circle with the other, making room for others to join the sacred meal. The icon exudes adoration and intimacy — clearly, the three persons around the table respect and enjoy each other.

The icon also portrays openness. There is space at the table for the viewer of the icon. For you, for me, for anybody. As if to say, the point of the great Three-in-One is not exclusivity, but inclusivity. God is radical hospitality. The point of the Three is always to add one more, to extend the invitation, to make the holy table more expansive and more welcoming. In fact, the deeper the intimacy between the Three grows, the roomier the table becomes. Likewise, the closer we draw to the adoration of the Three, the wider and more hospitable our hearts must grow towards the world.

And fifth, we will see that God is sacrificial love. The Trinity at its heart is an expression of deep, unfaltering, and life-giving love between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The relationship between the persons of the Godhead is not a relationship of domination, power-mongering, manipulation, or jealousy. It is a relationship of unselfish, sacrificial love.

If God's very being is grounded in love, and we are created in God's image, then who are we? What are we? Are we, like the Triune God whose imprint we bear, creatures motivated first and foremost by love? Is love what we are known for? If not, then what are we doing with our lives? What does our piety amount to?

Why should we care about the Holy Trinity? We should care because we are children of the Trinity at a time when the world is a mess and people are desperate. We are the children of a dynamic, diverse, communal, hospitable, and sacrificial loving God who wants to guide us into the whole truth of who God is and who we are. We should care because the mystery of the Holy Trinity has the power to transform our hearts, leading us towards coherence and dynamism, unity and diversity, hospitality and self-giving love.⁵ How does this work?

My former parish partnered with other churches to provide food and housing for those who were homeless. We had a voucher system in place with our local police department to screen people. I was also a police chaplain. I like cops. But sometimes when I received a call to okay a meal voucher the clerk at the police station did not want to give a voucher because the person in need had a record of priors. I then would tell the clerk to give the voucher. After all, if the person were arrested, he/she would get three "squares" per day anyway.

I helped many people who were homeless. When I invited them to our church some parishioners complained because the homeless smelled bad. Occasionally, a parishioner would warn me that these smelly homeless people were just taking advantage of me. And my reply was always the same--"I know."

One time I helped a woman in desperate need. Later she came back and handed me a small piece of paper with this scribbled note: "Thank you. You're the only one who helped me." In a small town with twenty-three Christian churches, we were the only one who helped.

You and I need to remember that there is not a place in the cosmos where Trinity love isn't. Think of it this way: Every day, every hour, every second, when you are awake and asleep, God pours out love energy that sustains all of creation. Like the atomic trinity—protons and neutrons surrounded by electrons--the Holy Trinity is always in motion, dancing to the music of creation, redemption and sanctification, making everything and everybody holy for God's service.

⁵ Debie Thomas, *The Undivided Trinity*, Journey with Jesus, May 31, 2020 on Journey with Jesus.

The economy of the Triune God is the working relationship of three persons who relate to one another in the One Godhead. And that relationship is built on love, outpouring love, the giving of the Father to the Son, the Son to the Father, The Spirit to the Son, the Spirit to the Father, ...each Person continuously giving to the other two.

That's how God works. And that's how we are called to work with each other in the body of Christ, the family of Christ, embracing one another with self-giving love which has no bounds. How much are we called to give? Everything!

God moves toward us so that we may move toward each other and thereby toward God. The way God comes to us is also our way to God and to each other: through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is faith, confessed in creed, celebrated in the sacraments, lifted by prayers, and shared in community.

Confessing faith is incomplete unless it becomes active love in our lives. Living faith in the God of Jesus Christ means being formed and transformed by the life of grace of God's economy: becoming persons fully in communion with all; becoming Christ to one another; becoming by the power of the Holy Spirit what God is: love unbounded, glory uncontained.⁶

Today the lessons, canticle and Gospel affirm the goodness of creation, sing praises to God, admonish us to be at peace with one another, and commission us to be the Good News of the Holy Trinity, to everyone we meet.

A Christian writer attended a writer's workshop. She sat next to an Orthodox Jewish rabbi. They began talking and sharing their life stories. After a while, the rabbi turned to the woman and asked, "Why do you people always say it's about having a strong belief in God? Don't you know that God's belief in you is even stronger than yours in Him?"

The rabbi then leaned forward in his seat and tilted his head so he could look at her directly. "You may believe in God, but never forget—it's God who believes in you."

He looked out the window and pointed. "Every morning that the sun rises, and you get to rise? That's God saying He believes in you, that He believes in the story He's writing through you. He believes in you as a gift the world needs."⁷

Today we join the baptismal candidates, Matthew and Jennifer, and renew our own baptismal covenant, once again committing ourselves to God and to each other in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Together we are called to trinitarian service. We are to be gifts to our families, our friends and our encounters with strangers we don't even know. We are empowered by God's grace to create a world of love where there are no borders, no divisions, no categories, no separation, no exclusivity, no marginalization, and no rejection. We are to offer ourselves in sacrifice to redeem those who have fallen and save those who have never even heard about the Good News of Jesus Christ. And we are made holy to make others holy; to witness for God's love. In short, we are given only one task in our baptismal covenant--don't be stingy with God's love!

Sometimes we may think if we behave in a certain way, identify with the right social group, attend the right church, belong to the right organization then that's enough. But it's not. The German theologian, Ernst Kasemann, once put it this way: "The trouble in the world and in the church is that the pious aren't liberal and the liberal aren't pious."

⁶ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us*, HarperCollins, 1991, p. 377.

⁷ Ann Voskamp, *The Broken Way*, Zondervan. From thepastorsworkshop.com

I don't like labels because labels do not adequately define the complexity of the individual or group. But, if you are a conservative, what are you conserving? If you are a liberal, what are liberalizing? If you are an independent, what do you stand for? If you are a libertarian, how do you use your liberty? And if you are somewhere between or beyond all these labels, what hinders you from listening to people who are different than yourself? Remember this, the only label that truly defines you is the name Christian. And this name not only indicates that you are a follower of Christ but also a gift from God who is Holy Trinity, who creates us, redeems us, and makes us holy gifts to all who meet us.

As we confess the Apostles' Creed together, let us remember our God whose very essence is self-giving. Let us proclaim the unity of the Holy Trinity in our unity of love-sharing. Let us be the children of God made flesh and blood, redeemed by the sacrifice of flesh and blood and made holy for service by the spirit of God who moves the entire cosmos, and each individual heart. Let us dance with the Holy Trinity, the dance of love. Remember, you believe in God, and **surprise!** God believes in you! Amen.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Surprises. Amen.