

Sermon for First Sunday after Pentecost: Trinity Sunday

Lectionary readings: Genesis 1:1-2:41; Psalm 8, Second Letter of Paul to the Corinthians 13:11-13; Matthew 28:16-20

Perichoresis

Theologians say that the Godhead, the Trinity,
is actually a communal dance,
one person ceding to another in love,
in attention, in blessing, in thanks.

How do I live into this holy dancing?

I listen in silence for the voice of God
in complete attention, in imperfect prayer until
I see in a lot some would call vacant
an ecology of blessing, a holy universe,
each creature sharing the breath of life,
hearing the music of the spheres,
joining in one dance.

Trinity Sunday inaugurates the long season in our church calendar following the feast of Pentecost, the time of the development of the church, the time in which we live out our calls from God, empowered by God's spirit within us. Trinity Sunday is unusual, because it celebrates a doctrine, not an event in the life of Jesus or of the community empowered to become the church. Doctrines use human language. I think we all suspect that, were we to start afresh, theologians might use different non-gendered language to describe the persons of the Trinity. But since doctrines are for us and not for the universe, we would still be drawn to using words that describe what's most basic and essential to life. We have kept the tradition of the Bible and of the church in using Jesus's parting words to his disciples in the sacrament of baptism, of inclusion into the Body of Christ, saying "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."

Trinity Sunday enables us to ponder the nature of God, what we affirm as the unity of God in three persons. Christian doctrine is the attempt to understand God in the work of theology—not only through the testimony of scripture but also through experience and the wisdom of the Church. Suzanne Guthrie writes: "The greatest minds of Christendom have applied reason, philosophical rigor, depth and breadth to understanding and interpreting the church's experience of 'Father' 'Son' and 'Holy Spirit.' But in the end, knowing God is as illusive as predicting a firefly's trajectory over a field of hay after dusk, as futile as keeping track of a drop of rain fallen into the ocean in a storm, as blinding as gazing directly at the sun. But contemplating Trinity offers lessons in the dynamism of creation, incarnation, delight, genesis, the inter-relationship of being, of nothing, of everything, of darkness, of light. Image. Silence. And, again, nothing." Richard Rohr in his book *The Divine Dance* suggests: "Don't start with the One and try to make it into Three. Start with the Three and see that this is the deepest nature of the One." This is a counter-cultural stance for us, to begin in loving community.

I suspect many of us take doctrines for granted but don't think they are particularly relevant. But in her book *By the Renewing of Their Minds* theologian Ellen Charry maintains that classical Christian theology seeks

to help believers *flourish* by knowing and loving God. Theologians have pastoral and moral aims and a belief that goodness and happiness should result from living into the doctrines of our faith, which promote what she calls “excellence” in action, affection, and self-appraisal.

The Trinity is not spelled out in scripture, even as we find what we have come to understand the persons that comprise the Trinity are stated at the end of Matthew’s gospel. In the Old Testament we have glimpses that can be said to attest to what the doctrine seeks to explain. In Isaiah we have the three-fold “holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of hosts” on the part of the seraphs as well as the implication that “the Lord” is both one and communal in the Lord God’s speech: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for *us*?” And in Genesis where God’s creation of the world is described in poetic language and time, we have God speaking in terms of common purpose and also in the plural – “Let *us* make humankind in our image.”

Rowan Williams writes of the Trinity: “Because God exists in this threefold pattern of interdependent action, the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit is one in which there is always a ‘giving place’ to each other, each standing back so that the other may act. The only human language we have for this is love: the three dimensions of divine life relate to each other in self-sacrifice or self-giving. The doctrine of the Trinity is a way of explaining why we say that God is love, not only that he shows love.”

I invite you to take time to observe and ponder the magnificent presence and work of God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer with our eyes and heart wide open. Let your meditation enable you to enter into a sacred and awesome mystery that changes us even in our glimpses of it –that surrounds and stands ready to embrace us. Be aware. Keep awake. Do not miss this God who is rooted in love and in intimate relationship. Do not miss the pattern of the divine dance. Let us live in gratitude that we are created in God’s image; and that we are not nor are we designed to be alone.

This doctrine helps us know in our gut that the times in which we live are terribly wrong, that violence and disrespect for the sanctity of human life are signs that our spiritual and social lives are seriously disordered and missing the mark, that holy symbols that should always relate to love are being used for unholy purposes. As we think about the time when our sanctuaries may reopen after the plagues of COVID-19 and racism too many have endured, I find Bishop of New York Andrew Dietsche’s words written in support of Bishop Marian Budde and of Presiding Bishop Michael Curry to be helpful: “The sanctuaries of the Episcopal Church are dedicated to the service and worship of God, and to house the altar of the Holy Eucharist and the pulpit of Gospel proclamation and the font of Holy Baptism, as well as the gathering center for the faith community. They are places where only love may reign, only peace be sought, and only justice be desired.”

St. Paul’s words in his Second Letter to the Corinthians give advice relevant for our lives today: “Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you.” And his blessing is so apt for us on this feast of the Trinity: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.”

Jesus’ last words to his disciples are not about hunkering down in fear and protecting their own interests, even in the climate of fear they lived in, but rather about going out from places where minds, bodies, and spirits are sustained through love into the entire world in his name, baptizing and teaching. And in following that call we experience the blessing and reality of Jesus’ promise to be with us always, to the end of the age.

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