

“The Holy Relationship”

The Gospel Lesson for today is read from John 16:12-15

**Hear the words from the Jesus’ beloved disciple, John:**

Read John 16:12-15

“The Word of God for the people of God.”

**“Thanks be to God”**

**Let us pray:**

**Holy God, you have given us grace, by the confession of the faith of your holy church, to acknowledge the mystery of the eternal Trinity and, in the power of your divine majesty, to worship the Unity. keep us steadfast in this faith and worship, and bring us at last to see in your eternal glory One God, now and forever. Amen.**

**Intro:**

Trinity Sunday asks us to celebrate an idea. A theological idea. Worse, it asks us to celebrate this idea we can’t wrap our heads around, no matter how hard we try.

Like many of you, I’ve been on the receiving end of many well-meaning but inadequate attempts to explain the three-in-one: “The Trinity? Oh, well, it’s sort of like water! You know, liquid, vapor, and ice? Three phases, one entity? The Trinity is like that!” Or, “Think of a tree! The roots, the trunk, and the branches. Three parts, one tree. Or an egg. The shell, the eggwhite, and the yolk. Or a triangle. Or a three-leaf clover. Or a human family — father, mother, and child.”

All of these analogies fall short, and none of them address the deeper question: Why should we care? What difference does the three-in-one make? Fine, God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But so what?

In our Gospel reading this week, Jesus tells his disciples, **“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.”**

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*I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.* Can we pause for a moment and hear the tenderness in those words? The kindness? The depth of patience, perception, and forbearance Jesus offered to his disciples? He didn't burden their frightened, restless souls with more than they could handle. Instead, he promised them the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, the Spirit of ongoing revelation. That Spirit would slowly guide the disciples — and by extension, all of us — into a fuller knowledge and comprehension of everything Jesus left unsaid.

And I'm finding peace and comfort in Jesus's promise that I don't need to know everything right now. I don't have to find the perfect analogy or metaphor to explain the three-fold fullness of God. The Trinity is not easily understood by witty bumper stickers or clever internet memes; it is a great and holy mystery, and my first job is to stand in humility before it. To explore the nature of God and who God is, is to come to the end of what human language can explain. It is to become speechless. It is fall to our knees and say, “I cannot hold the singularity, the otherness, the strangeness of this God. I cannot domesticate him. I cannot tame him.” All we can do is seek the truth with our whole hearts, and trust that Jesus's promise holds. All we can do is await the Spirit who will come and reveal God's truth to us in God's time.

So we begin our celebrations with the humble acknowledgement that we are out of our depth. But now what? Is there anything we can say or know with assurance on this Trinity Sunday? Franciscan priest and theologian Richard Rohr argues that caring about the Trinity requires orienting ourselves in a new way: “Don't start with the One and try to make it into Three,” he writes in his book, *The Divine Dance*. “Start with the Three and see that this is the deepest nature of the One.”

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What might it look like to follow Rohr's advice? *Start with the Three and see that this is the deepest nature of the One.* What will we discover about God's character, God's personality, God's priorities, and God's reality, if we see threeness as the ground and essence of God's being? Here are a few possibilities:

***We'll see that God is active.*** If God is triune, he does not exist in stillness. Rather, God's self is fluid. God moves. Or to use Rohr's language again: God flows, and God is flow. God dances, and God is dance. Regardless of whether we'll learn to tolerate the discomfort of divine fluidity or not, we worship a God who is always on the move, always spilling over, always organic, always a surprise. His unity does not require him to be stiff. (Maybe to come up with and use an inadequate analogy, maybe God is the image of a father and daughter dancing – where the daughter places her feet on her fathers feet and they dance to their favorite song.)

***We'll see that God is diverse.*** If God exists in three persons, then each person has his (or her) own way of embodying and expressing goodness, beauty, love, and righteousness. As Rohr puts it, the Trinity establishes that there is an built-in plurality to goodness. “Goodness isn't sameness,” he writes in *The Divine Dance*. “Goodness, to be goodness, needs contrast and tension, not perfect uniformity.” If God can incarnate goodness through contrast and tension, then it's worth asking why we can't. Or won't. Why do we fear difference so much when difference lies at the very heart of God's nature?

***We'll see that God is communal.*** It's one thing to say that God values community. Or that God thinks community is good for us. It's altogether another to say that God is community. That God is relationship, intimacy, connection, and communion.

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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 privilege independence and autonomy over companionship and mutuality? 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 community. God is Relationship, and it is only in relationship that we’ll experience God’s fullness.

*We’ll 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 in Genesis), 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 the circle with the other, making room for others to join the sacred meal. As a whole, the icon exudes adoration and intimacy — clearly, the three persons around the table respect and enjoy each other. But it also cries out for openness. There is space at the table for the viewer of the icon. For me. For you. For us. As if to say, the point of the great Three-in-One is not exclusivity — God is not a middle school clique — but rather, 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 grows.

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Likewise, the closer we draw to the adoration of the Three, the wider and more hospitable our hearts grow towards the world.

And finally, *we'll see that God is 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. Which begs the question: 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 by love? If we are not, then what are we doing with our lives? What does our faithfulness, goodness, godliness amount to?

So why should we care about the three-in-one? We should care because we are children of the Trinity. The children of a mysterious, fluid, diverse, communal, hospitable, and 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 Trinity has the power to transform our hearts, leading us towards unity and life (the kind of living that gets us up and moving), and toward unity and diversity. This Father's Day and always, may our lives reflect the truth and beauty of the Triune God.

Let us pray:

God of heaven and earth,  
before the foundation of the universe and the beginning of time  
you are the triune God:  
the Author of creation,  
the eternal Word of salvation,  
and the life-giving Spirit of wisdom.  
Guide us to all truth by your Spirit,  
that we may proclaim all that Christ revealed  
and rejoice in the glory he shared with us.  
Glory and praise to you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

John 16:12-15

June 16, 2019

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now and for ever. Amen.