

May 26, 2024
The Feast of the Holy Trinity, Year B
Grace Church, Muncie
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Isaiah 6:1-8

Psalm 29

Romans 8:12-17

John 3:1-17

In the Name of God, the Holy and Undivided Trinity. Amen.

In their own way, each of today's readings describes a process of growth. People end up in places they couldn't have planned. Isaiah, overwhelmed by the majesty of God, moves from being a frightened person of unclean lips to saying, "Here am I; send me." Paul walks us through the process of Spirit-driven growth from being adopted children, to becoming heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ. And Nicodemus begins, slowly, to learn what it might mean to be born of the Spirit.

We all know that growth of any kind – physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual – involves things we can measure, such as genetics, calorie intake, books read, trips to the gym, &c. There are also factors we can't quantify, factors that remain unknown, mysterious. Not mysterious as in an Agatha Christie novel, but mysterious as in, well, God.

In former times, when a young person was confirmed, the Bishop would move down the line of confirmands, asking each of them a ritual question. One such day, the Bishop approached Bobby, saying, "Can you tell me about the Holy Trinity?" On that morning, it must be said, Bobby was suffering from a bad case of laryngitis, and his response was incomprehensible. The Bishop leaned in and said, "I'm sorry, I don't understand you." Summoning all his strength, Bobby rasped, "You're not supposed to. It's a mystery."

And that, my dear friends, could be the world's shortest sermon on the Holy Trinity, allowing you all to get home early to set up for your Indy 500 Watch Party. But, since we're here, let's linger for a moment or two, maybe even three.

As we think together about this mystery that we name the Trinity, let's be clear from the start that we don't have to find the perfect words to describe the fullness of God. We cannot find those words! After all, our language is limited, and our words usually serve to close in rather than to open out. The poet Kenn Storck implores us:

Expand do not contract God
For God is the Great Iconoclast.¹

¹ Kenn Storck, <http://pastorkennsstudy.blogspot.com/>.

The Triune God is a great and holy mystery, and our first, maybe our only, task is simply to stand, like Isaiah, in humility before it. Words fail us. We cannot domesticate God; we cannot tame God; we cannot manage God. All we can do is await the Spirit whom Jesus promised will come and reveal God's truth to us in God's time.

From the get-go, then, this requires some reorientation on our part. We sometimes imagine that we have a corner on the God-market. That *our* way of talking about God captures (!) the best and truest version of who God is. The mystery of the Trinity will always challenge this idolatry; the truth of God will always exceed what our minds can imagine, and our languages express.

So now what? Call it a "Mystery" and call it a day? Franciscan priest and theologian Richard Rohr suggests a different perspective: "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."

Start with the Three and see that this is the deepest nature of the One. What might we discover if we follow Fr. Richard's advice? Here are four suggestions:

Number 1. We will discover that God is dynamic. If God is triune, God cannot be static. Instead, God's self is fluid. God moves. Or, to use Rohr's language: God flows, and God *is flow*. God dances, and God *is dance*. We worship a God who is always on the move, always spilling over, always a surprise. "Expand do not contract God."

Number 2. We will discover that God is diverse. If God exists in three persons, then each person has its own way of embodying and expressing goodness, beauty, love, and righteousness. As Rohr puts it, the Trinity affirms that there is an essential plurality to goodness. "Goodness isn't sameness," he writes, "Goodness, to be goodness, needs contrast and tension, not perfect uniformity."

Number 3. We will discover 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 an altogether more profound thing to say that God *is* community. That God *is* relationship, intimacy, connection, and communion. God is not distant and alone, but is three in one, a communion of love who comes to make a home with us.

If we believe that we are, all of us, made in God's image, in God's Triune image, we must believe that we, too, are dynamic, diverse, and communal. We might all be able to quote John Donne, that "no [one] is an island," but we tend to live in ways that contradict this truth – we lift up and worship the idol of the individual.

There is an ancient African concept, *ubuntu*, that in recent years has become better known in the wider world. The late Archbishop Desmond Tutu said that *ubuntu* is difficult to translate into Western languages. If you Google it, you will find many versions of it. For me, the clearest version is, "I am because we are."

God is Relationship, and it is only in relationship that we experience God's fullness, that we experience life's richness. In his sonnet for Trinity Sunday, Malcolm Guite offers this couplet:

The Triune Poet makes us for His glory,
And makes us each the other's inspiration.²

Number 4. We will discover that God is love. At its heart, the Trinity is an expression of deep, unfaltering, and life-giving love between the persons we name as Father, Son, and Spirit. The relationship between the persons of the Godhead is not a relationship of domination, manipulation, or jealousy. It is a relationship of unselfish, self-giving love.

In the early 1990s, I was the organist at San Francisco's Unitarian Universalist church. One Sunday morning, one of the ministers was speaking on "The Six Religions of the Bible." Somewhere during his talk, he used the phrase *the absurdity of the Trinity*. (Pause) *The absurdity of the Trinity?! I was so startled that I put down whatever research book (or novel) I was reading way up there in the balcony. What could he possibly mean? After some conversation the following week, my colleague admitted that it was a phrase he liked to use to zing (these days, we would say troll) Christianity, which he considered to be dogmatic, rigid and absurd.*

In some ways, of course, this Unitarian Universalist minister was right. Christianity is too often dogmatic and rigid – too many of us have experienced that truth. But the claim that the Church can and must make again and again, is that ours is a God who created us in the Divine image simply to love us. Not to be served by us, or to be amused by us, but simply, and extravagantly, to love us. *For God so loved the world.*

You might still be asking, "so what? Are we back to calling it a 'Mystery' and calling it a day? Why should we care?" We should care because we are created in God's image. Through the spirit of adoption, we are children of the Trinity. We are children of a mysterious, fluid, diverse, communal, hospitable, and loving God whose deep desire it is 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, to draw us into an ever-changing and diverse community formed in hospitable love for

² Malcolm Guite, *Trinity Sunday*.

the other. Like the unselfish love of others that is personified in those we honor this Memorial Day weekend.

This sounds like an enormous task – to keep all these fluid dynamics in mind. But we don't have to do all the work. We can't do all the work.

Recall Jesus' promised gift of the Spirit who would guide us into all truth. We are dependent on that Spirit *and* dependent on one other, because the Spirit regularly speaks to us through the words and deeds of those around us. *I am because we are.*

In closing, I want to offer a poetic prayer of Catherine of Siena, mystic and reformer, who lived in the last half of the 14th century (1347-1380), around the same time that Trinity Sunday was established as a universal feast (1334). Feel free to close your eyes for a moment as Catherine speaks directly to God; feel free to make her words your own.

O eternal Trinity,
my sweet love!
You, who are light,
give us light.
You, who are wisdom,
give us wisdom.
You, who are supreme strength,
strengthen us.
Today, eternal God,
let our cloud be dissipated
so that we may perfectly know and follow your Truth
in truth,
with a free and simple heart.

In the Name of God, the Holy and Undivided Trinity. Amen.