

God is a Community

Acts 17: 22-28

II Corinthians 13:11-13

Today is Trinity Sunday in the Church's calendar, and I know you feel starved for a sermon on the doctrine of the Trinity. I must say the philosophical and metaphysical speculations on the Trinity are mostly beyond my grasp and interest.

I read an article by a pastor describing one of the most important moments in his theological education. He was sitting by one of his favorite professors listening to a theologian's lecture that was stupefyingly obtuse. The student was lost. He looked over at his professor who gave him one of those shrugs with his shoulders and arms that said: "Don't ask *me* what he's talking about!" It gave him hope, because some theology is beyond us all. It was probably a lecture on the Trinity.

But there is a dimension of the meaning of the Trinity that I find intriguing, and it has to do with God as Community, a Community of Being and a Community of *beings*.

The theme of this summer's Season of Grace as chosen by the Board of Worship is: The Recovery of Community. Today's sermon is a prelude to a summer full of sermons on community. Our God is a Community, which is the spiritual foundation of our life together in community.

I

The doctrine of the Trinity began in our experiences of God, not in some theologian's dusty study. People experienced God as Creator, Maker, Father. They experienced God in Jesus. Jesus was the one in whom they encountered God. They experienced God as Spirit, indwelling, life-giving Spirit.

So how do we make sense of this experience without having three gods? How do we say that they are one and that they are of the same character? There's no good cop, bad cop routine going on. God is love. Period, not comma.

Early Christians began with the central belief of the Jewish faith that God is *One*. And if God is one then the universe, all things and everyone are one in God.

Perhaps the most beloved hymn about the Trinity in our tradition is *Holy, Holy, Holy*, which ends in the refrain, "God in three persons, Blessed Trinity." We sang it before we had to explain it!

God is a community of three. Then it expands to all creation. The many-ness of life is brought into the oneness of God. *God is so one and many; so many*

and one. The American motto is *e pluribus unum*, out of many, one, though we seem to be struggling mightily with this today. Of the being of God, we might say *unum e pluribus*: out of one, many.

God glories in the beautiful and fructifying diversity of life. Not every rose is red, and not every flower is a rose. That goes for us human folk too!

II

God is a Community of Being, a Community of Relation, and it begins in the community of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We must not get bogged down in the literalness of the language. A woman theologian talks about the problem with the traditional doctrine of the Trinity: “Two guys and a bird!”

Many years ago I was visiting the Durham Cathedral in Northern England, one of the great medieval cathedrals. Below the cathedral near the River Wear that does a hair-pin turn beneath it was a small museum. As I walked into the museum, I saw a worn 12th century sculpture. There was a robed figure sitting in a chair holding a child in its lap. But along the way its head had been broken off and lost, so I couldn't tell whether the figure holding the child was a male or female. It looked like a maternal figure to me, probably because I was used to thinking of a mother holding the children her arms. I was drawn to it in its ancient worn beauty. Maybe, I thought, it is Mary holding Jesus.

I asked the curator of the museum about it. “What is this a sculpture of?” He replied, “It is a sculpture of the Trinity.” “I see the figure holding the child—that’s the Father. I see the child—that’s the Son. But where is the Holy Spirit?”, I asked. He said, “The Holy Spirit is the stone.” The material substance that holds them all together as one! That is how Paul thought about the Holy Spirit as he talked about its presence in the church: “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

But I came away also struck by the maternal appearance of God in the sculpture. The Trinity as Mother, Child and Holy Spirit. The Trinity doesn’t have to be “two guys and a bird.” Today, when I baptize, as I lower the person into the water, I often say, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, One God, Mother of us all.”

The Trinity is the Eternal Circle of Belonging

III

In our passage from Acts I, Paul has come to Athens, home of Greek philosophy and religion. He has walked throughout the city and seen all the statues which were more than statues, also objects of worship. Jews called them idols. Then Paul walked up to Mars Hill. At the top was the Acropolis, just

beneath was the Areopagus where the intellectual elite met to debate and discuss philosophy, religion and matters of politics.

There Paul launched into a most daring sermon. He began seeking a point of contact, a place of commonality with his audience.

I see, he said, how extremely religious you are. I've seen your statues and places of worship. I walked by one altar with the inscription: "To An Unknown God."

Then Paul made the next move in his sermon: The one you worship as unknown I proclaim to you today. This God is the Creator of all things. God made the world, its creatures and all living things. Moreover, God made all the nations and peoples of the world. God made them and us that we might—now pay attention to the verb—that we may *grope* after, *feel* after, search and seek after God and find Him. This God, he said, is not far from each of us.

Then he closed this part of the sermon by quoting one of their philosopher/poets: "For in Him we live and move and have our being." Then he quoted a second, "For we too are His offspring."

Paul was not moving in his sermon from the small end of the telescope to the large end: from Jesus to Creation. He moved from the large end to the small one: From the whole world and its creation to Jesus.

Some theologians and preachers throughout the years have criticized Paul's sermon for this approach: "Worst sermon he ever preached!" His approach should have been, they say: "I've been through your city, and seen all your pagan idols! If you don't turn from them and destroy them, God, the *real* God, will turn from you and destroy you.

I've heard sermons like that. Sadly, some of our missionaries have preached that as they have gone to other cultures.

But Paul started with the biggest picture possible: the God who made the universe and all that is in it, the world the Greek philosophers pondered too! Then he led them to the God revealed in Jesus. There were a few in the crowd that day who heard, believed and followed him. Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris and a few others. *Some got it!* Which is all a preacher should hope for most days.

IV

The Doctrine of the Trinity started with the biggest picture possible: The Eternal God, Maker of all, and with the Eternal relationship between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Relationship and community are at the heart of God, and our capacity for relationship and community come from the God who is Community.

The most intriguing description to me of the Trinity from these first centuries uses the word *perichoresis*. Literally it means to dance, *choresis*, from which we get the word choreography, and *peri*, which means around or in a round. God, Christ, Spirit are dancing in a round! Not static and still, but moving, dancing in a circle. And so is the universe, God's dazzling, intricate, living universe.

A much-loved print of the Picasso's painting *Sun Dance* found its way onto many walls in the 1960's and 70's. Colorful figures are dancing in a round, around a bright, colorful sun. Each figure a different color, all joined in joy.

That's how I think of Trinity today, a *perichoresis*, all life joined with God, Christ and Spirit in joyful dance.

There's room for you too in the circle. "Come join us", God says, "There is room for you all", says Jesus. "What are you waiting for?" says the Spirit.

Shall we dance?

One, two, three,

One, two, three

One, two, three

The Holy Trinity.

Amen

Now for the Benediction, from the close of Paul's Second letter to the
Corinthians:

Finally brothers and sisters, rejoice, be encouraged, have the same mind, be
at peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another
with a holy kiss (Not yet!) All the saints salute you.

Then he wrote:

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
the Love of God
and the community (koinonia/fellowship) of the Holy Spirit
be with you all.

Amen.