

The Trinity: A Progressive Understanding Trinity Sunday

Matthew 28:16-20 2 Corinthians 13:11-13
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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As a preacher, I often like to ask questions during my sermons so that you might ponder things a bit closer from your own personal perspective. **For a faith that is unreflected upon isn't of much benefit.** Perhaps the question I repeat most often is the one that I think everything else hinges upon: **What do you believe about the nature and character of God?**

How you answer that question for yourself determines, to a large extent, how you understand other issues like: prayer, suffering, justice, salvation, heaven and hell, forgiveness, diversity, equality, and community.

For instance, I used to believe the traditional understanding of God, that God was offended by our sin and therefore required a blood sacrifice in order to make things right, in order to forgive humankind and allow us to enter heaven when we die. The only perfect sacrifice, however, was God's self. So God took on human form, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, for the purpose of a sacrifice that would count on our behalf.

That's called the Doctrine of Sacrificial Atonement. But more and more Christians today, including myself and many of you here in this congregation, **no longer believe in a God who is either unable or unwilling to forgive us and make things right without a blood sacrifice.** Instead, we chalk up that particular concept and understanding of the nature and character of God to an ancient one that was carried over into both Judaism and Christianity. Yes, there are some that feel we have no right to call ourselves Christian, or at the least are far off base if not heretics, if we don't hold to that ancient understanding of God. So I ask again today, what do you believe about the nature and character of God?

I ask that in context of today's liturgical emphasis known as **Trinity Sunday.** There are many progressive Christians who wonder why we even spend time focusing on this ancient doctrine. I am not one of them. For I believe **taking time to intentionally and thoughtfully examine the Doctrine of the Trinity is absolutely crucial to our understanding of the nature and character of God.**

The doctrine itself hoped to clarify that question. It states that God chooses to reveal God's self in three distinct ways, which unfortunately it calls 'persons.' Yet, God is still one God. That's why you often here the Trinity expressed as Three-in-One, or One-in-Three. Putting words to that distinction in the ways God reveals God's self, they chose what is called the **Trinitarian Formula: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.**

There is no doubt, however, that this designation is both **hierarchical and patriarchal**. And the major problem flowing out of this is that the Christian Church itself, following the culture of its day, also became obsessed with hierarchy and patriarchy – **top down and male dominated**. This approach has had profound and oftentimes devastating political and social consequences.

There are many in our day and time, therefore, who just want to toss the whole thing out. Again, in my opinion, that would be a mistake. Why? Because it is in the wrestling with this concept of God as “three persons” that we continue to evaluate and perhaps even redefine our understanding of the nature and character of God.

This is the approach taken by now-retired Episcopal Bishop **John Shelby Spong**, a brave leader within the progressive Christianity movement. Back in 2009, Spong posted an article interestingly entitled, “**Why I Am Not a Unitarian.**” It was in response to a growing chorus of folks who claimed that his understanding of Jesus was basically the same as Unitarians. I used that title for my Trinity Sunday sermon title back in that same year. As it turns out, that sermon (thanks to someone here in this sanctuary this morning) found its way to the Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, senior pastor at All Souls Unitarian Church here in Tulsa. He found it curious and an opportunity for a good discussion between the two of us, after he realized I wasn’t attacking Unitarianism.

I am fully aware that several of you here at College Hill are on the brink of being Unitarian/Universalists from a theological perspective. I question that about myself at times as well, given that I no longer hold so tightly to many of the ancient understandings of the supernatural nature and character that was ascribed to Jesus of Nazareth, promoted by the early Christian church and biblical authors. I, too, have a problem with seeing God as an old man, a young man, and a dove. But, like Spong, I mean no disrespect for Unitarian beliefs and practices. And I have the highest regard for Rev. Lavanhar and the ministry of All Souls, and other Unitarian/Universalist congregations. Yet, some of our own church members who left for the Unitarian church only to return have stated, “I missed Jesus.”

And to those critics who think progressive congregations like College Hill aren’t “Bible-based” churches, just look at the consistent way we start with scripture, thoroughly examine and explore what it has to say, then and now, and apply it to our own lives, albeit not always in a literalistic way. Like Spong writes, “**The temptation in all religion is to freeze the faith story in some literal and time-bound form and then make ultimate claims for that interpretation.**” Strangely, the theological tradition to which we Presbyterians trace our roots was born in the understanding of “reformed and always reforming, according to the word of God.” And yet, **many in our tradition are steadfastly reluctant to reform theological, biblical, and doctrinal positions and understandings beyond the dogma of the 16th and 17th centuries.** That’s why so many of us appreciate the way Spong approaches the understanding of the Trinity.

In both solidarity and departure with Unitarianism, Spong writes, “I, like them, do not want to be part of a Christianity that fails to make room for those who need to probe intellectually and spiritually the creedal formulas of yesterday.” However, he does not want to do away with those ancient doctrines altogether. That approach leads us to find new ways to put into words how we understand the experience of God’s presence. But as we have always known, any words for and about God are woefully insufficient. They also run the same risk of being literalized in our own day and time. So Spong continues:

Every Christian generation must sing the Lord's song in the accents of its day and inside the bounds of knowledge available in its generation.

I feel no great need to preserve the words of my religious past, but I never want to reject the experience of the past that caused the words of my faith story to come into being. As a Christian I seek to separate the experience of God, which I regard as eternal, from the traditional words used to explain that experience, which I always regard as time bound and transitory.

When I reject the traditional interpretation I do not reject the experience that I am certain created the interpretive words... I will wrestle with the scriptures, but I will never abandon the scriptures. I will seek to break open the creeds, but I will never reject the creeds. I will fight with doctrines like Incarnation and the Trinity, but I will never dismiss the truth that people were pointing to when these doctrines were first formed.

So where does that leave us in terms of understanding the doctrine of the Trinity in our day and age? I'm currently taking a more simplistic approach to understanding the experience of God's divine presence.

- I see a different way of defining God as 'Father,' or 'Creator,' as **God Beyond Us.**
- I see a different way of stating God as 'Son,' or 'Redeemer,' as **God Among Us.**
- And I see a different way of stating God as 'Holy Spirit,' or 'Sustainer,' as **God Within Us.**

In other words, **God is utterly transcendent, as well as present with and among humanity and all creation, as well as within each of us and the community. That's why I can still self-identify as Trinitarian, not Unitarian. Yet on this particular point, I realize that the distinction may not be all that far apart.**

So while acknowledging that God is indeed a **Divine Mystery**, how do you articulate *your* experience of God, and your understanding about the nature and character of God?

I'm going to close with an excerpt of a poem, originally written in the Old Irish language, that was turned into a Christian hymn. It's attributed to St. Patrick during his Irish ministry in the 5th century. Some scholars think that it was written later in the 8th century. Either way, it predates the Reformation by almost a millennium. You will recognize the variation of this poem in the benediction that I use almost every Sunday to close our service of worship. It falls into the category known as an 'encompassing prayer.'

St Patrick's Breastplate: *An Excerpt*

*I bind unto myself today
The strong Name of the Trinity,*

*by invocation of the same
The Three in One and One in Three.*

*Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me.
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.*

*I bind unto myself the Name,
The strong Name of the Trinity,
By invocation of the same,
The Three in One and One in Three.*

A portion of the entire poem was enhanced and reset to music by Shaun Davey in a song entitled, **The Deers Cry**. It appears on his 1994 album *The Pilgrim*. It is beautifully sung by Rita Connolly.

I was introduced to this moving piece of music just a couple of weeks ago at the Celtic Spirituality class that 8 of us from College Hill are currently taking, led by Sister Jane of the Osage Forest of Peace. So as we listen to it, I invite you to relax, perhaps close your eyes as you hear the segment of the song that includes this closing benediction, which is just over 1 minute long. It is my personal hope that our choir will sing this at some point in the future. The lyrics in this portion of the song are as follows:

*Christ with me, Christ before me,
Christ behind me, Christ in me,
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down,
Christ when I arise, Christ to shield me
Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me*

Amen.