

# The Trinity: How We Encounter God

Roman 5:1-5    Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman  
June 16, 2019

This is Trinity Sunday, the one Sunday of the year almost universally disliked by pastors. Yes, it's that yearly time, the Sunday after Pentecost, when good and learned preachers will try their hardest to explain the unexplainable God. And after all is said and done, God will still remain unexplainable – a Divine Mystery. So why bother? I think it's important to a vibrant spiritual journey of faith to reflect upon our best understanding of the nature and character of God. For that, in turn, will greatly influence both our own beliefs and our practices.

As Presbyterians, along with every other mainline Protestant denomination, as well as the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, our starting point is what's called the triune nature of God. God as Three in One, and One in Three. Our theological faith tradition historically claims that this one God is revealed to us, and relates to us, in three distinct ways: traditionally known as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But let's face it, this ancient doctrine of the Trinity uses language that is considered by many good and faithful Christians in our day and age to be confusing, misleading, hierarchical, and certainly patriarchal. That's not too much of a surprise knowing it was male bishops in the politically charged climate of Imperial Roman Emperor Constantine who formulated this doctrine in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century.

That's why many of us find comfort in the words of folks like Martin Luther, who stated at the beginning of the Protestant Reformation just over 500 years ago, "To try to comprehend the Trinity endangers your sanity." Or John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, who declared, "Bring me a worm that can comprehend a human being, and then I will show you a human being that can comprehend the Triune God."

One way to deal with the mystery of the Trinity is to simply reject the notion altogether and refuse to engage with it any more. Many, but certainly not all, Unitarians have taken this path. But some of the most progressive Christian theologians have decided that even though they no longer accept the ancient doctrine of the Trinity as written in the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, they nonetheless seek to remain in the debate over how we understand and experience God in a triune way.

As an example, here's the approach taken by Jesus Seminar scholar and now-retired Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong. See if you can relate. He writes:

**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.

Notice the primary emphasis on the process of putting into words how the early Christians *experienced* God. A valid question for you and I, therefore, is how do we experience God? And what words would we, would you, use to express that experience? When it comes to specifics, I would guess there are probably as many different answers as there are human beings. In my own journey of faith, I have found **Celtic spirituality has helped me put into words what I've been experiencing for quite some time now.** And that's true for many in this congregation. As I've stated in previous sermons, **I experience God not so much as a Divine Almighty Being out there, but as a Sacred Presence that has the potential to be found and experienced within all of creation, including within ourselves.** And yet I haven't lost sight that, as expressed in a sermon by the Rev. Rob Gieselmann, an Episcopal priest and writer, "God is too big for your brain. You cannot capture nor contain God." And he importantly notes, "Tradition has reduced theological statements *about* God to writing." And in a wonderfully progressive approach to the issue, he continues: "The problem with reducing articles of truth to writing is that we end up confusing what is written with the truth itself, the ink with the meaning." For me, that includes the Bible. We worship a living God, not words on a page that point to that God. He continues, "Words are finite, and truth like God is not. The writing merely reflects the truth that has been experienced – the writing cannot and does not contain the truth..."

"Remember this: experience precedes the communication. In the case of the Trinity, **we experience God as triune before writing the word, "Trinity," on paper.** The words, "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," followed the *experience* of God as Father, God as Son, and God as Holy Spirit. Thus, these three words express some semblance of description of the church's experience, but they are not the experience itself. For example, one person might identify God as "Father," while some other person might identify God as "Parent," or perhaps "Mother." Or "Creator." **It is the experiential relationship being defined that counts, not the word used.** No words or creeds can contain God fully – God is much larger than ink and paper and doctrinal pronouncements. Modern Christians are learning just how limiting words can be."

That's why I find it ironic, and sad, that there are still those (and yes within this presbytery) who want to hold everyone else's feet to the fire when it comes to dogmatically giving intellectual ascent to printed words, like those in the Apostles' Creed. **Words meant to be descriptive have become literalized and engraved in granite. What I appreciate about the approach of progressive Christianity is that it seeks new ways to expand our understanding and expression of God. And sometimes it means taking a hammer and chisel to that block of granite.**

For quite some time now, "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," have been replaced by many with "Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer." Some even use metaphysical words for God, such as "Energy," "Wisdom," "Source," "Essence," "Light," "Justice," and "the dynamic of Love." Others see the doctrine of the Trinity as simply seeking to reveal the

way God is experienced as a dynamic community, as in an eternal dance. Affirming the importance of relationship in human life, then, reflects what it means to be created in God's image. **Trinitarian theology asserts that relationship is fundamental to the nature and character of God, and community is the foundation of God's interaction with the world.** Therefore, when we live in the love of authentic community we reflect the triune nature of God, who has established a covenant relationship with us. Some folks are now fond of stating all this as the **Tri-unity of God.**

So where does that leave us in terms of understanding the doctrine of the Trinity in our day and age? Many of us progressives currently take a more simplistic approach to understanding the experience of God's Sacred Presence.

- A similar way of experiencing God as 'Father,' or 'Creator,' is to state: **God Beyond Us.**
- A similar way of experiencing God as 'Son,' or 'Redeemer,' is to state: **God Among Us.**
- A similar way of experiencing God as 'Holy Spirit,' or 'Sustainer,' is to state: **God Within Us.**

**God Beyond, Among and Within. That reflects an understanding that God is utterly transcendent; God is present with and among us – as exemplified in the person of Jesus; and God dwells within each of us and all of creation.** Or, as stated in the ancient Celtic prayer I often use as a weekly benediction, God goes before us, behind us, above us, beneath us, beside us, and within us. If that's your experience of God, then you, too, can still identify yourselves as Trinitarian. But let us never forget that God is indeed a Divine Mystery. For there is always something just beyond our knowing, beyond our understanding, beyond our sense of certainty. Saying that, I encourage you to **reflect upon how you articulate your experience of God, and your understanding of the nature and character of God.** Again, how you answer that will strongly influence your beliefs and actions – and yes, therefore, how you relate to others.

I am deeply grateful for a community of faith like College Hill where we can safely explore all these things together in authentic community and relationship.

Amen.

Resource:

Rev. Rob Giesemann, *God Is Too Big For...* Trinity Sunday (A), Sermons That Work, June 19, 2011.  
<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/sermon/god-too-big-trinity-sunday-2011>