

The Trinity: Community in Relationship

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

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Over the years, I have often referred to, or directly asked: What is your understanding of the nature and character of God? **How do we, as human beings, relate to and experience God, the Divine?** We must start by acknowledging that any words used to describe God are inadequate, unsatisfactory, and woefully lacking. Some are even misleading. After all, **words cannot ever describe that which is indescribable, that which will always ultimately remain a Mystery.** However, that hasn't stopped us from trying. In fact, within the Christian faith, it took nearly 300 years after Jesus' death to come to what might be described as a forced agreement that then became the official doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church, known as the Nicene Creed.

It's called the **Doctrine of the Trinity.** As Presbyterians, along with every other mainline Protestant denomination, as well as the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches, our starting point is what is called the triune nature of God. We've heard it explained as **God as Three in One, and One in Three.** It's what we sing about in the hymn, "Holy, Holy, Holy!" 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 the Father/Creator, the Son/Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit/Sustainer. 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 surprising knowing it was a group of male bishops in the politically charged climate of Imperial Roman Emperor Constantine who formulated this doctrine in the early 4th century.

That's why many of us find comfort in the words of folks like German priest and theologian **Martin Luther**, who is credited as basically starting the Protestant Reformation within the Roman Catholic Church 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." Perhaps that's one reason why College Hill stopped reciting the Apostles' Creed at some point even before I became the pastor here over fourteen years ago.

However, while some faith communities either reject or simply refuse to engage with the concept of a triune God, 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 recently deceased Episcopal Bishop **John Shelby Spong**. See if you can relate, I certainly can. 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 that it's all about trying to describe how we experience God, not define God. 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. That's why we have a Celtic Circle small group. 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.** That's why I simply explain the experience of God as **Divinity that is beyond us, is among us, and is within us.** Therefore, I still consider myself to be trinitarian. Spong also wrote a short online column back on August 15, 2013, where he answers a reader's direct question about the meaning of the Trinity. He responded this way.

The Trinity is a human definition of God, and since the human mind could never fully embrace the mystery and wonder of God, to literalize a human definition of God borders on the absurd. For human beings to worship their own creation is the essence of idolatry.

That's why I stated in a sermon many years ago that one of the greatest idols in Christianity today is worshiping the Bible itself, rather than worshiping the living God to which the Bible points. Spong continues:

The Trinity is a definition not of God, but of the human experience of the divine and is, therefore, an attempt to make rational sense out of that human experience.

We experience God as other, beyond anything that our minds can grasp. This is what we mean when we say God is Father – the Ground of all being.

We experience God as an inward presence, so deep within us that we cannot name the reality we know is there. That is what we mean when we say God is Spirit, ineffable, life-giving, inward, and real.

We experience God in the life of others. Sometimes to lesser degrees, sometimes to what seems like a total degree. This is what we mean when we call Jesus, "the

son," and why we frame doctrines like 'the incarnation.' Our experience was and is that in Jesus we saw the presence of God flowing through his human life."

[Spong concludes,] Is that who God is? No, but that is what our experience of God is and so we claim it. **The Trinity is not a definition of God, it is an experience into which we live.**

Unfortunately, many in the Christian tradition, including some within the Presbyterian denomination, use the doctrine of The Trinity as a litmus test to determine who's a "real" Christian, or not. Or, at least who they consider outside our historical Reformed Tradition, going back to John Calvin.

What I appreciate most about a progressive approach to Christianity is the space for honest searching, questions, doubts, and in-depth exploration. This approach seeks new ways to expand our understanding and expression of God. For example, another way to express our experience of the triune nature and character of God is as **a dynamic community, a community in dynamic relationship, as in an eternal dance.** In the seventh century, John of Damascus, a Greek theologian, used the concept of **perichoresis** to describe the Trinity. In Greek, *peri* means "around" (the origin of our word "perimeter"), and *choresis* means "dancing" (where our word "choreography" originated). According to this concept, what has traditionally been known as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are like **three dancers dancing around together in harmonious, joyful relationship.**

Emphasizing the oneness of God, others picture God in the center of a circle with three arms leading out from God. So, as Desmond Tutu stated, "Isn't it wonderful that we have this Doctrine of the Trinity that speaks of God as a fellowship, a community. So, you have this wonderful image of the community that is God, the Trinity." **Emphasizing the nature of God as 'community in relationship', and that we are created in the image of God, leads us to how we, in turn, are also to live as a community in relationship.**

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.** As one biblical commentator writes, "the doctrine [of The Trinity] is ultimately about **a world saturated with divine presence.**" I like that. William Wallace writes,

- In God the Creator we are one with the Earth.
- In God the Son we are one with all people.
- In God the Spirit we are one with everything.

God Beyond, Among, and Within. That reflects an understanding that we experience God as utterly transcendent; we experience God as present with and among us – as exemplified in the person of Jesus; and we experience God as imminent, dwelling within each of us and all of creation. Or, as stated in the ancient Celtic prayer I use almost weekly as our benediction, **God goes before us, behind us, above us, beneath us, beside us, and within us.** If that's your understanding and experience of God, then you, too, can still identify yourself 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. 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 in 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>

William L. Wallace, *Worship Materials: Trinity*, from the Festive Worship collection, 11-19-2015.

Dwight Welch, *One Progressive Christian Take on the Trinity*, Approaching Justice.

Ed Taylor, *Affirmations and Confessions of a Progressive Christian Layman – The Trinity*, 4-17-2014.