

The Trinity: Try Explaining That Again

Trinity Sunday

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

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One of the great benefits of being on a 6-week sabbatical last year at this time is that I didn't have to come up with another sermon for Trinity Sunday. Yes, it's that yearly time 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. But that doesn't mean it's not important to a vibrant and spiritual journey of faith to reflect upon your understanding of the nature and character of God. For that, in turn, will greatly influence both your beliefs and 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. Our historical theological faith tradition claims that this one God is revealed to us, or relates to us, in three distinct ways: 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 patriarchal.**

That's not too much of a surprise knowing male bishops in the politically charged climate of Roman Emperor Constantine formulated this doctrine in the early 4th century. That's why I find comfort in the words of folks like Martin Luther, who stated at the beginning of the Protestant Reformation nearly 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 anymore. 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 God in a triune way. As an example, I like to share the approach taken by now-retired Episcopal Bishop **John Shelby Spong**. 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.

When I reject the traditional interpretation I do not reject the experience that I am certain created the interpretive words.

Notice the 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? When it comes to specifics, I would guess that 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. 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 within all of creation.** And yet I haven't lost sight that, as expressed in a sermon by the **Rev. Rob Gieselmann**, "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. 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, Son, and 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. What I appreciate about the approach of progressive Christianity is that it seeks new ways to expand our understanding of God.

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," "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.** Affirming the importance of relationship in human life, then, is a reflection of 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. In other words: God is community; God creates community. 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? I'm currently taking a more simplistic approach to understanding the experience of God's Sacred Presence.

- In a similar way of experiencing God as 'Father,' or 'Creator,' I now state it as: **God Beyond Us.**
- In a similar way of experiencing God as 'Son,' or 'Redeemer,' I now state it as: **God Among Us.**
- In a similar way of experiencing God as 'Holy Spirit,' or 'Sustainer,' I now state it as: **God Within Us.**

God beyond, among and within. That reflects an understanding that God is utterly transcendent; God is present with and among us; and God dwells within each of us and all of creation. Or, as stated in the ancient Celtic prayer I 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 I guess we can still identify ourselves 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 strongly influences your beliefs and actions – and yes, therefore, how you relate to others.

I'm thankful for a community of faith like College Hill where we can safely explore all these things together in authentic relationship.

Amen.