

“The Mystery of the Trinity”
The Rev. Lauren McDonald
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, VA
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It’s Trinity Sunday. A hard day to preach. One of the people I listened to when preparing for today said that Trinity Sunday is the only Sunday we have in the church year that’s based on a doctrine. There’s not a story or event tied to this Sunday. The Trinity isn’t even mentioned in the Bible. At least not by that name, *Trinity*. Of course God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are mentioned plenty, just not in terms of the Trinity.

Doctrines are things you study in seminary or learn about in confirmation class or argue about with theologians. But they’re challenging to deal with head on in the middle of Sunday morning worship. You see I could go on and on about the commingling of substances; I could wax eloquently (or not so eloquently) about the hypostatic union; I could throw out some fancy Greek words like homoousios, hypostasis, or perichoresis, and y’all would give me blank looks, and though you might smile at me and shake my hand after the service, you’d probably go home wondering whether I’d been possessed by a spirit of incomprehensibility today. Plus, you’d be bored. And one of my rules of preaching is, “Don’t be boring.”

So, instead of trying to explain the doctrine of the Trinity directly, I’m going to try to come at it a little sideways, and hopefully a little more accessibly (You can tell me if I succeeded later.) When I was in seminary taking my systematic theology class, and we were discussing hard-to-understand topics like the atonement, the nature of sin, how salvation works, and others, my

professor always said, “You can’t appeal to mystery until the last 15 minutes of class.” What she was trying to do was to get us to really wrestle with theology, not just throw up our hands and say, “It’s a mystery, so we can’t explain it.” Of course, the Trinity *is* a mystery, and we can’t explain it. But in honor of my theology professor, I’m going to wait until the end to make that argument.

As for the wrestling, as far as I can understand, the important thing to realize about the Trinity, the thing that we can relate to in our daily lives is the fact that our God lives in a relationship. It doesn’t really matter if we have trouble wrapping our brains around exactly how the three-in-one works.

Sometimes metaphors can be helpful in trying to understand, and you may have heard some of them, like thinking about how there are three leaves that make up one clover, or how liquid, ice, and steam are three forms of the one thing, water. Another one is thinking about hearing three notes sounded in a room. You can hear each of the notes distinctly if you listen carefully, but you also hear the one chord that they make up together. Of course the nature of a metaphor is that it is like something but is not that thing, and though it can help us gain a greater understanding of a thing, there comes a point when the metaphor just doesn’t give us a complete image. God is not a clover or water or a musical chord, although those images may help us catch a glimpse of what God is like. God *is* a Trinity, three persons in one substance. And though we as humans may never have a perfect understanding of what that means, that’s okay. However we make our explanations, there is more to God than we can ever think or imagine, and I, for one, think that’s a good thing.

So I return to what seems to me the most helpful thing to us about this doctrine of the Trinity – God being in relationship. Some have even referred to it as a kind of dance between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, a continuous movement of the three persons as they mutually dwell in one another. “All of the actions of the Son involve the Father and the Spirit, and likewise the Spirit acts in conjunction with the Father and the Son. If you see God the Creator in the natural world, then you also see the Spirit who moved over the earth and the Word that God spoke when life was created. If you experience the presence of the Holy Spirit in your life, then God the Father and God the Son are also dwelling within you. If you are moved by the power of the gospel witness to the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, then the Father who created you and the Spirit who sustains you are speaking with one voice to the witness of the Son.”¹

The three persons of the Trinity are in a perfect, loving relationship with each other, creating, redeeming, and sustaining. This interconnectedness shows us how to be in relationship as well. God created us in God’s image, and so we are intended to be in relationship too. Not in the same Trinitarian way as God, perhaps, but in relationship with God and creation and one another.

Of course, because we are human, our relationships are not perfect. But we are intended to be in relationship, as God is in relationship. Our American culture stresses individualism, but we are all interconnected. We can’t exist without each other, and what we do affects other people as well as the rest of

¹ John Horn, “Sermon on Gregory of Nanzianzus and the Trinity,” delivered March 7, 2007 in the class “Cappodocians and Friends” at Seabury-Western Theological Seminary.

creation. Take the oil spill in the Gulf, for example. Human dependence on oil as well as greed and inattention to safety details are the reasons oil is gushing out into the Gulf, killing much of the animal and plant life wherever it goes. We are connected to the fish, shrimp, plankton and other sea life that is dying. We are also connected to the fishermen, shrimpers, and those who work in tourism along the Gulf coast, who are now losing their livelihoods, many of whom were already poor to begin with. We are connected to them. What hurts them also hurts us. That's what happens in relationships.

The same thing is true with the war in Afghanistan or any other war. War may seem far away. It may seem like something for politicians to worry about, but the people who die there are our sons and daughters, our husbands and wives, our friends. We may not know them personally, if we don't have loved ones serving in the armed forces, but they are still connected to us. So are the people in the Sudan. So are the people in Haiti. We are all connected just as the three persons of the Trinity are connected.

What would it be like for us to be in relationship the way the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are in relationship?

Don't you think that was what Jesus was trying to tell us?

It's so hard for us to understand that way of being in relationship and even harder for us to live into it. Knowing how what we do impacts others and how what they do impacts us. Living together in love with each other as God does with us. It's a mystery.

Not a mystery to be solved.

Not a mystery to be abandoned as too difficult.

A mystery to be explored.

A mystery to be lived into and loved into.

The great gift of the Trinity to us is that the one we name Father, Son, and Holy Spirit has made enough room for us to be a part of the relationship.

It's not a closed circle. There's enough room in God for all of us.