



SERMONS THAT WORK

Trinity Sunday (A)

The Pandemic and the Holy Trinity

[RCL]: Genesis 1:1-2:4a; Psalm 8 or Canticle 13 (or Canticle 2); 2 Corinthians 13:11-13;
Matthew 28:16-20

In this time of pandemic, grasping the essence of the nature of God is urgent and important. How might an abstract-sounding church doctrine matter now? We find in scripture and the teaching of the Church that the nature of God is an essential connectedness. This communion within God's own self gives us a glimpse into the very heart of God – and, knowing that a deep connectedness describes well the universe in which we live, speaks to the longings in our own hearts as we are separated from others.

Before God created everything we see and know, there was a communion of three separate persons of the Godhead who created you out of love, for love. Not just one being, but relationships and communion, before time and forever. This is why you were created: to be in healthy, loving, generative relationship with God and all creation. And out of this web of relationships comes both your salvation and the redemption of all creation.

The word Trinity never appears in the Bible. Yet, in passages like our reading from the Great Commission in Matthew's Gospel, we read of baptizing new followers of Jesus in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. We read a different Trinitarian formulation in Second Corinthians, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you."

We find that the first Christians were less concerned about doctrinal formulation than in following the way of Jesus. They patterned their daily lives in prayer and fasting, in service to others, and gathering for worship. Into that community, they baptized new followers using that same Trinitarian formula. In time, they came to think through what it meant to speak of a God who is both one and three.

All through the Bible, there was both the idea of one God and the description of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Greek writers would use the term *trias*, and the early church writer Tertullian coined the Latin word, *Trinitas*, or "Trinity". He also coined "Person" and "Substance" to describe what his mind saw when he contemplated the scriptures regarding the three-in-one God. Tertullian would say that there is a Trinity—a threeness—with three separate persons of a single substance.

The analogies used to describe what we mean fall short. Saint Patrick's three petals forming a single shamrock. John Wesley's example of three candles in a room, yet one light by which to read. We could speak of other analogies for the Trinity, like H₂O being steam, water, and ice. But whatever language we use, we know God is not two dudes and a bird. In fact, when we use any single image, like the shamrock, we are describing an early church heresy. Better is to use a number of images, knowing that while our words are helpful, they can't clearly and precisely express the ineffable.

John Wesley put it this way: "Bring me a worm that can comprehend a man, and then I will show you a man that can comprehend the triune God!" God is more than we can wrap our minds around and that is necessarily so. Yet the Trinity is not a mystery in the sense of a puzzle we can't solve; the Trinity is a mystery in that we see the truth of it, but there is more than we can fully comprehend.

Using the word mystery, in this case, is closer to describing as mystery the love among humans or even humans and pets. We know so much about those we love, and yet new occasions arise which reveal there was more to discover in the relationship with our child or spouse or parents. We can and do know of God from God, by the revelation of scripture, from the way God is revealed in nature, and through that most perfect revelation of God, Jesus the Christ. And yet, there is more than we know – a mystery that is deeper than our minds can fathom.

Early Christians looked to God as known in scripture and, with a nudge or two from that undivided Triune God, forged the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. Then, moving back from that concept, they looked anew at the scripture and discovered how well it all fit. Reading the Bible with new eyes, they saw that God was in communion with God's own self before creation. God is a relationship among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and then God creates all that is for relationship.

If we humans preferred to be alone and came together only rarely to procreate and then separate as some animals do, the theory would fall short at this point. But we humans love to get together. This is a lesson learned so well during the shelter-in-place orders that have come with the pandemic. We are, in fact, the beings in communion we were created to be. Being separated by the coronavirus has not broken that sense of communion. Across the Church, people are finding ways to stay connected. Imperfect as they are, our new ways of joining together come from a deep longing which is in the very heart of Holy Trinity.

Jesus would put it this way: Love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. This is that for which we were created: love upward toward God and outward toward humankind. That web of relationships is very interconnected. When we come to love God more, we get that heart for other people God has, and so love of God draws us to other people. Loving other people fully means seeing them as God sees them, and so loving people can also draw us to God. It is the communion for which we were created.

If we are being candid about the interconnectedness of creation, we must acknowledge that woven within the tapestry are not just people and animals, but bacteria and viruses. Rather than accidents, they are part

of the created order which give rise not just to pain and suffering, but also a world where generosity, kindness, and self-sacrificial love are possible.

In this time of physical distancing to stop the spread of the virus, we are discovering more about how deep our human longing is for community. Christian mystics affirm the essential oneness they see revealed running through all that is. Those same mystics describe the love that is shot through all creation. And that love brings a loving response from us if we open ourselves to it.

While we may not gather for in-person worship, the essential truth of God as revealed in the Holy Trinity is all the more urgent in our present moment. We are connected deeply to all creation. That is the essential reality the Trinity helps us to understand.

We also live in a society with great divisions and we all know of people who are alone in a time of despair and anxiety. The love we are created to show then must find expression in our reaching out to others in the ways available to us. This is not something we do to earn the favor of the Holy Trinity. Instead, staying in contact with others is part of how God blesses us, letting us be a conduit of grace to those we call, write, and meet with online.

Early Christians put the practices of faith ahead of trying to be precise about what they meant when referring to God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We, too, can prioritize practices of faith and let our understanding catch up later. The real grace in our understanding of the Holy Trinity is that it shows us that none of what we want to do for others relies on us alone – for the Holy Spirit will work through the imperfect words and actions to connect us to other people and more fully to our Triune God. *Amen.*

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