

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
June 15, 2014  
Trinity Sunday  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Genesis 1:26-2:3  
Psalm 150  
2 Corinthians 13:5-13  
Matthew 28:16-20

Today is Trinity Sunday on the liturgical calendar. It is the only Sunday of the year where we shift our focus from God's *actions* in history to save us, and instead focus on the *being* of God as revealed to us in Scripture.

The word “Trinity” itself is not found in Scripture, but the Bible does reveal to us One God in three Persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In fact, the word itself is a Latin term which means “three in one.”

Trinity Sunday was introduced into the liturgical cycle as a celebration of this teaching. The Scripture lessons for today enable us to reflect on this important doctrine, but more importantly, they direct our attention to the *reality* that gave birth to the doctrine in the first place. For in the Biblical tradition, the one God is experienced as transcendent Creator, as incarnate Son, and as present in and among the lives of believers in the Holy Spirit.

Part of what makes the doctrine of the Trinity so complex is that it is essentially a revealed truth that transcends our finite human wisdom. It is therefore

hard to explain because there are no adequate analogies in human experience or wisdom.

Some have tried to explain it in terms of an egg, where you have the shell, the yoke, and the white of the egg. Some have tried to explain it in terms of water, which can be boiled to produce steam or frozen to produce ice.

These attempts to explain the being of God may be well-intentioned, but they fall prey to a heresy known as *Modalism*, which essentially says that the three Persons of the Trinity are just different “modes” or expressions of God. Sort of like a concert artist who starts the concert with one outfit, than changes into another, and then changes into yet another.

The Scriptures, and early tradition of the Church, however, teach that although God is One, the Son is not the Father, and the Spirit is not the Father or the Son. As the Athanasian Creed (which we will recite) says, “we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in unity; neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance.”

Perhaps the most helpful way to help us understand the Trinity may come to us from our brothers and sisters in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. They have a word which they use to speak of the Trinity. The word is *perichoresis*. It comes from the words “circle,” and “dance.” For the Orthodox, the Trinity is an eternal

dance of Father, Son, and Spirit, a sharing of mutual love, respect, honor, joy and happiness.

One scholar puts it like this:

The image of a dance (perichoresis) suggests moving around, making room, relating to one another without losing identity. The divine unity lies in the relationality of Persons, and the relationality is the nature of the unity. Trinity means that shared life is basic to the nature of God. God is perfect sociality, mutuality, reciprocity and peace. As a circle of loving relationships, God is dynamically alive. There is only one God, but this one God is not solitary but a loving communion that is distinguished by overflowing life.

I include this quote not only because it may help us to see the Trinity differently, but because I also believe it captures the heart of our epistle lesson today. Paul concludes his letter to the Corinthians with the formula of the Trinity, but his blessing is more than just a nice liturgical way to end his letter. For what he is concluding is a series of exhortations which describe the ways Christians are to relate to each other in the church. He is giving the Corinthians “dance lessons” as it were.

Just as the Godhead is a dynamic interplay of loving relationships, even so the church is to be a dynamic interplay of loving relationships. In other words, the church is to reflect the reality of the Triune Godhead in its relationships. Those relationships are to be characterized by mutuality, by reciprocity, by peace. As in a dance, there is to be a moving around, a making room for each partner without destroying the differences.

If you read Paul's words through these lenses, then, the Trinity becomes a very practical doctrine. The same is true of the Gospel lesson, where you will notice that baptizing persons in the Trinitarian formula of Father, Son, and Spirit, is closely linked to teaching persons to obey Jesus' commandments.

The church father Augustine was walking along the beach one day, reflecting on the doctrine of the Trinity and trying to make sense of it. He observed a young child with a bucket. The little girl would run to the water and fill the bucket, then return and pour it into a little hole.

Augustine approached the child and said, "little girl, what are you doing?"

She replied: "I'm trying to put the ocean into this hole."

Trying to understand or explain the Trinity intellectually is somewhat like trying to pour the ocean into a hole in the sand, because it's an attempt by the finite to grasp the *infinite*. Sort of like trying to comprehend how God uses ordinary stuff like bread and wine to change us and do his work in our lives. It is another one of those opportunities to ask, "how can this be?"

So today we bow at the foot of a great mystery. We acknowledge our human limitations to adequately explain a great truth; and at the same time we accept that truth as being divinely revealed and central to orthodox Christian faith and practice.

As we make our way to the Lord's Table today, let us do so with humble gratitude. Let us resolve to know this God who comes to us as Father, Son, and Spirit, and to "dance the dance" which he has assigned to us here in this local fellowship of believers.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.