

**THE TRINITY: A BIGGER PICTURE OF GOD**  
**TRINITY SUNDAY**

(06/12/2022)

Scripture Lessons: 2 Corinthians 13:11-14  
John 16:12-15

*“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.” (2 Corinthians 13:14)*

Today, the first Sunday after Pentecost, is Trinity Sunday. It is a time to reflect on one of the fundamental doctrines of our faith. Even more than a doctrine, the trinity can be a guideline to our understanding of God and therefore our faith, the quality of our relationship with God.

Our present trinitarian understanding of God evolved over time. It is not a major theme in the teachings of Jesus or in the way the apostles articulated the faith of the early church. Their affirmation is simply that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, the Son of the living God. There is no discussion or explanation of the Trinity anywhere in the Bible. We find only a few references to it in one or two New Testament passages that date about fifty years after Jesus’ death, passages that I suspect were added to the gospels at a period when the church was beginning to formulate its dogmas and doctrines, when it was beginning to label certain teachings orthodox and others heretical.

Trinitarian statements began to appear within the Christian community toward the end of the first century. However, these thoughts were not incorporated into any kind of doctrinal confession until 150 CE, when the Old Roman Creed took on a trinitarian form. Not until the adoption of the Nicene Creed, nearly two hundred years later, did the Trinity become a doctrine accepted by both the eastern and western church. At no point was an affirmation of the doctrine of the Trinity made a requirement for becoming a Christian. This indicates that the doctrine developed as people speculated about the object of their faith, as they sought to understand the nature of God, Jesus’ relationship to God, and the relationship of God and Jesus to the Holy Spirit.

As a doctrine, the Trinity is a matter of belief. As you know, I believe that faith is much more important than beliefs. The Protestant Reformer John Wesley once said that faith is not the same as a belief or any system of beliefs, no matter how true those beliefs may be. It seems to me that beliefs guide and shape our understanding of God, whereas faith is the quality of our relationship with God. Beliefs are important, but it is not our beliefs that will enable us to experience the kingdom of God. Only faith, only our relationship with God can do this.

Of course, our beliefs about God, our understanding of God, help shape our relationship with God. This is true of any relationship. The more we understand other people, the more we know about them, the more deeply we can relate to them. But knowing *about* a person is not the same as having a relationship with that person, even if what we know about that person happens to be true. It seems to me that our relationship, especially if it is a relationship of love, is more important than our beliefs, especially since our beliefs may or may not be true, especially since there is no way we can empirically prove our beliefs either true or false.

The Trinity, then, is not primarily a belief system, but a way of shaping our relationship with God. It shapes our thinking about God. It also provides us with three different ways of connecting with God, three ways that, despite their differences, are essentially the same.

The trinitarian formula occurs quite commonly in our worship. The most common expression of this is the ancient formula of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is articulated in the Gloria Patri:

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost.  
As it was in the beginning  
Is now and ever shall be:  
World without end. Amen.*

After the offering we sing the Doxology, or at least we did when, before the pandemic restrictions, we passed the offering plates from person to person. We sing,

*Praise God from whom all blessings flow;  
Praise him above, ye heavenly host;  
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.*

When we baptize children or adults, we do so in the name or in the spirit of the Trinity. The minister says to the baptismal candidate,

*I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*

In a baptism, a pastor who emphasizes function rather than gender when speaking of God might say,

*I baptize you in the name of God, your creator;  
Jesus Christ, your savior;  
and the Holy Spirit, who will sustain and guide you throughout your spiritual  
journey.*

At the conclusion of our worship, we receive the benediction that the apostle Paul extended to his churches:

*And now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
the love of God,  
and the fellowship, communion, and guidance of the Holy Spirit  
be and abide with each one of us this day and forevermore. Amen.*

A fifth reference to the Trinity occurs on those occasions when we use a trinitarian affirmation of faith such as the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed during worship.

The formulation of the Trinity as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost or Holy Spirit describes or differentiates God by using the analogy of a family. God is described as the father and Jesus as the son. The problem with this metaphor, and it is a metaphor, is that we don't know exactly how the Holy Ghost or the Holy Spirit fits in. We do know that this member of the trinitarian family was originally thought of as feminine. The patriarchal church weeded this out quite quickly!

Rather than get into an historical or theological analysis of the doctrine of the Trinity this morning, I would like to suggest how a trinitarian understanding of God might be helpful to us. If it gives us a bigger picture of God, if it helps us to understand God more fully, then it might also strengthen our faith, the quality of our relationship with God. This is the most important part of our spiritual journey as Christians.

When we have discussed prayer in our study groups, we invariably discovered that, though we affirm the doctrine of the Trinity, most of us feel closer to one of these aspects, faces, personae, or experiences of God than the other two. For example, when we turn to God in prayer, we naturally tend to picture some aspect of the God to whom we pray. We feel more comfortable with or connected to one aspect of God than the others.

This is not to say that one of the three personae of God is more important than the others. It is only that we feel more comfortable with one than the others. We need to remember that each of the persons of the Trinity can serve as ways or channels that connect us to the majesty, mystery, and complexity of God.

Many years ago, in one of our confirmation classes, Wally Hite suggested a way of understanding the Trinity that I thought was ingenious! Wally suggested we picture God as a triangle with each of the three sides a different color. (For the time being, let us set aside the limitations that are inherent in a two-dimensional model or metaphor.) In keeping with church tradition, I suggested to Wally that God the father would be yellow, Jesus would be red, and the

Holy Spirit would be green. The three parts or lines or faces of the triangle are of the same essence; they are all part of the same triangle.

Wherever we stand, we will be seeing one of these colors or faces of the triangle. But each color touches and blends into the other two. It seems to me that no matter which side of the triangle we face, behind each side is the center that we cannot see. This is the great mystery of God. However, we can see into a little bit of the center through each of the three sides.

To go back to our example, when some of us pray to God, we think of God as a loving father. We may know that God is not a white man with a long white beard sitting on a golden throne just above the clouds and speaking English with a New England accent, but this is the way that many of us picture him. We may know that even the pronoun “him” is probably not an accurate way to describe or refer to God, because the true God, the God beyond gods, is neither male nor female.

Our language cannot do justice to that which is beyond language! This is because language is useful for describing *things*, but God is not a thing. God is not a thing among other things in the universe. This may be what the Buddhists mean when they say that God is nothing-no thing, not a thing. Although we know that God is not a thing, for any person or thing that existed in the realm of time and space would not be the true God, many of us still picture and pray to God as a loving father.

This is fine! The purpose of the picture is to help us connect to God, help us pray to God. When Jesus prayed to God, he seems to have pictured God as a father. He uses the term “Father” in his prayers and in his teachings about God. He taught us when we pray, to say: “Our Father, who art in heaven.” Jesus told us God is like a loving parent, like the father of the prodigal son. Actually, when Jesus used the Aramaic term “Abba” in his conversations with God, the word should be translated as father/mother, or even in the more familiar form of mommy and daddy combined.

When some of us pray, we picture and pray to Jesus. Most communion Sundays, we invite people to engage in this form of prayer. We picture Jesus sitting next to us and talk to him as we would if he were sitting next to us. In doing this, I hope we experience Jesus as real, alive, and present. We encounter Jesus as the risen Christ just as the disciples did following the resurrection.

When I think of *worshiping* God, I think of the creative power of God. When I say a prayer of thanksgiving, a prayer of confession, or an intercessory prayer, I picture God as father or as a combination of father and mother. This is what I picture when I sing most of our hymns,

though we should note that we have hymns that are directed to God the Father, to Jesus, and to the Holy Spirit. We also have hymns that refer to all three parts or persons of the Trinity, for example, “Come, Thou Almighty King” and “Ancient of Days, Who Sittest Throned in Glory,” which we are singing this morning.

When I picture Jesus, I am not moved to worship. Although I believe Jesus is the incarnation of the Logos, the word of God, and could be seen as one of the persons of the Trinity, I don’t worship Jesus. I don’t think Jesus wanted his disciples or us to worship him. I think of Jesus as a friend. As recorded in John 15:13-14, Jesus tells his disciples,

*This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing, but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.*

Because I consider myself a disciple of Jesus, and because I take seriously his invitation to regard him as a friend, I find it easy to talk to Jesus about my life: the parts that are weak and in need of strengthening, the parts that are broken and in need of healing. Because Jesus was a human being just like me, I know he understands.

When some of us pray to God, we picture or pray to the Holy Spirit. I believe this is true even in those instances (or religions) where people do not conceptualize that to which they pray as the “Holy Spirit.” I find myself drawn to this focus in prayer as well.

I can picture God as a spirit both within me and among us as a community of faith. I can sense this spirit as a presence in my life. This presence or inner power is like an energy field of compassion and love. When I am in this field, I am in the kingdom or realm of God. When I am in the presence of this spirit, the Spirit of our risen Lord, what I think, feel, say, and do is guided by this presence. Unfortunately, I am not always or even usually in this field. This is why I have a more than marginal propensity to say or do stupid or insensitive things!

Every morning, when I am out walking our dog, Brie, I say a simple prayer that I address to God the Father. I say,

*God, help me to be aware of your presence in my life today.  
Help me to be open to you.  
Help me to be open to the ways in which you will be trying to create me.  
Help me to be open to the ways that, through me, you will be trying to create other people and the world.*

So, I begin my day with a prayer to God the creator. As I am going about my day, when I think of it (which is not as often as I should), I talk to Jesus. I ask Jesus what he thinks about something or someone. I ask Jesus what I should be thinking or feeling or doing. I do this just as I would if he were with me. Since I know Jesus from scripture as well as from prayer, I have a sense of what he is saying to me.

When I meditate, when I sit on my mat in silent prayer or meditation (which is not as often as I should), I experience the presence of God as Holy Spirit. I experience myself in the middle of a force field, a field of energy that flows through me and around me. It fills me with its presence, especially in those rare moments when I can empty myself, when I can move outside my self-centeredness, when I can set aside my petty concerns to make room for the presence of God.

So, come to think of it, I commonly pray to all three aspects or dimensions or persons of God during a given day. “Commonly,” by the way, does not mean often. I do not engage in any of these forms of prayer as often as I could or should. Especially when we remember that the apostle Paul told us to “pray without ceasing!”

If the three are truly one, as the doctrine of the Trinity suggests, then it doesn’t matter whom we picture as we pray. We are just facing the triangle from a certain direction. What is important is that we pray. When we pray, we deepen our relationship with God. Since faith is the quality of our relationship with God, when we pray, we strengthen our faith.

The apostle Paul tells us that faith precedes works. When we strengthen our faith, we establish the foundation for the living of our daily lives. We increase the possibility that our thoughts, feelings, words, and actions will be in accordance with God’s will, that they will be helping God to create us and create the kind of world that God wants, the kind of world where earth and heaven are one.

In the scripture lesson this morning from the Gospel of John, Jesus opens us to a consciousness of the presence of the Holy Spirit. He promises that the Spirit will continue to disclose the will of God for us and for the world. The revelation never ends!

We need to be open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit in all we think, feel, say, and do. We need to be open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit when we are trying to understand the complex issues of our time. As Christians, it helps to remember that the Holy Spirit is the continuing presence of our risen Lord. There is nothing the Holy Spirit would say to us that would be contrary to the teachings of Jesus. This is because the three are also one--three differently colored sides of the same triangle.

The Holy Spirit continues to teach us, to disclose the truth to us. The truth of God, even the truth of Jesus is too majestic and mysterious to be captured by a few short books—even by the Bible. As the apostles learned, discipleship is a journey, a pilgrimage. We who follow Jesus learn more about the One whom we declare to be the Christ as the journey unfolds. We must be ready for insights that are fresh and new but are still consistent with what we know of what Jesus taught and how he lived his life.

In John 14:6, Jesus refers to himself as the Truth. When he tells us, as he does in our scripture lesson this morning, that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Truth, this means that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus. Even after his earthly ministry was over, even after the canon of the New Testament was closed, the revelation continues! Even after his earthly ministry as Jesus of Nazareth was over, his presence continues!

This is why the doctrine of the Trinity is important. It gives us a bigger picture of God, a deeper understanding of God. It enables us to connect with the God who is present to us in nature and in history, especially the history of Israel and the Christian church. It enables us to connect with Jesus, whom we proclaim to be the Christ, the incarnation of God. It encourages us to listen for that still, small voice within us, the voice of the Holy Spirit that seeks to guide us as individuals and as a church.

Our belief in the doctrine of the Trinity and our use of the trinitarian formula in our worship can help us deepen our understanding of God. It can guide and shape our prayer. If it does this, it can help us deepen our faith, the quality of our relationship with God. Let us be open to this revelation of unfolding truth about that God whom we know as creator, savior, and guide.

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