

John 16:12-15

CLOSER AND CLOSER

The English minister, Colin Morris, once said that any preacher with good sense would call in sick on Trinity Sunday. He has a point because the doctrine of the Trinity is not the easiest of Christian doctrines to explain or understand. Rather than try to grapple with the mysteries of faith, many attempt to simplify, to reduce the many unknowns to a single statement, which makes religion easier for them to understand.

George Buttrick, a well-known preacher of the 20th century, met a man while riding on an airplane. As Buttrick was writing intently on a yellow note pad, the man seated next to him interrupted him and said, "Excuse me, I hate to bother you, but you seem to be working very diligently on something there. May I ask what it is?" "Certainly. I am a Presbyterian minister and I am working on my Sunday sermon." "Oh, religion," the man observed. "I don't like to get all caught up in the ins and outs of religion. 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.' The Golden Rule: that's my religion." "And what," said Buttrick, "do you do, sir?" "I work at the university," he said. "I am an astronomer." "Oh," said Buttrick, "astronomy. I don't like to get caught up in the ins and outs of astronomy. 'Twinkle, twinkle little star.' that's my astronomy."

Speaking of astronomy, I do believe there is a parallel connection or observation that is found in both astronomy and our religion. As to the universe, the more we explore it and understand it, the less we know about the universe. In other words, the more information that we gather – via the Hubble space telescope, satellites, and the space station – we realize that the universe stretches farther and farther into space; the universe is so vast, in fact, that we know far less about the universe than we thought we knew. Likewise, the more we come to know and understand God, the less we know about God. As we gain more and more insight into the greatness of the eternal and triune God, we are humbled to realize that this God is far greater than we assumed.

So, why attempt to preach on the Christian doctrine of the Trinity? If God is such a mystery and is so unfathomable, why even try to understand who God is and what God does throughout the immense universe and even here on Planet Earth? After all, neither the word Trinity nor the doctrine of the triune God is found in all of Holy Scripture!

We try to grasp and further our understanding of this "one God in three persons" because God has made God's own self known to us. God has reached out to us, and has revealed himself to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and, in doing so, God has made every attempt to move closer and closer to us in order to be in relationship with us.

And, while there is no mention of the doctrine of the Trinity in the Bible, there are numerous references throughout the New Testament wherein the one God is revealed or made manifest as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Jesus told the disciples, just prior to his ascension, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," and we have done just that as we administered the Sacrament of Baptism to Connor this morning. In several of his letters to the churches, the Apostle Paul concludes by saying, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (see 2 Cor. 13:13). And, in our lesson for today, Jesus, the Son of God, tells the disciples, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth... He will glorify me... All that the Father has is mine."

It's important to say, with regard to the Trinity, that there is one and only one God! We do not believe in three gods or one God, who is divided into thirds. And yet, this one God makes himself known and acts in three ways. When we say or sing, "God in three Persons, blessed Trinity," what we really mean to say is that we affirm there is one God, who has at the same time three distinct "ways of existence" as God or "ways of being" God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Throughout the centuries, God the Father has been revealed as the Creator, who creates, rules over, and sustains the goodness of the creation. Certainly, God is Sovereign over all the earth. Eventually, God chose a people for himself. Yahweh revealed himself to and entered into relationship and covenant with Abraham and Sarah and brought forth the nation Israel from among their offspring. God delivered his people. God blessed and judged Israel when it was necessary but God did not forsake his people. Even though they were faithless (as we too are), God was always and is forever faithful!

In the fullness of time, God sent forth the Son, the promised Deliverer, to his people. Jesus was fully God yet fully human; he became one of us and he was God with us in the flesh. Jesus was God's full communication of himself. When we look at Jesus, we are seeing as much of God as we ever hope to see because this Jew from Nazareth is "of one Being with the Father." Jesus not only revealed God to us, Jesus also showed us what humanity at its very best looked like. Jesus taught with authority. Jesus died for sinners on the cross. God raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus is our Lord and Savior.

At Pentecost and down through this present age, God (the Father and the Son) sent forth the Spirit to form the Church and breathe new life into Jesus' disciples. The Spirit helps us to hear and believe the good news of what God has done in Christ. The text for today states, the Spirit will guide us deeper and deeper into the truth. The Spirit teaches us to remember Jesus' words and understand better how they relate to our lives. The Spirit glorifies Jesus, who glorifies the Father. The Spirit enables us to grow and binds us together in community. The Spirit equips each and everyone with gifts and then empowers us to go forth and participate in Christ's ongoing ministry of love, compassion, and service to others. At baptism and onward (for both Connor and all of us), the Holy Spirit of God comes to us and dwells in us, and assures us of God's love for us.

Do you hear in that brief summary of who God is and what God has done – as God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – how God has moved closer and closer to us all? God loves all that God has created, especially human beings who are fashioned in God's own image. Thus, God is drawn to us. While God is transcendent (i.e., infinitely far away, existing apart from the material world), at the very same time, God is intimately close to us. God came to us and was with us in Jesus of Nazareth, and now, God is with us and within us through the vibrant breath of the Holy Spirit.

That's why I try my best to preach on the doctrine of the Trinity so that we will remember who God is and what God has done for us. Furthermore, we are reminded that, while God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit has acted on our behalf, we cannot remain passive and only be on the receiving end of God's grace. We are called to respond, to bend our lives toward God and give of ourselves so that we move closer and closer toward God.

Just as the Spirit glorifies the Son, and the Son glorifies the Father, we are called to glorify God in all that we do. In both our words and our deeds, we are called to witness to God's goodness, to exalt and honor God with our praise. Someone once defined the word glorify to mean, "enhancing God's reputation in the world." That is our job description, to give God praise and our profound adoration, wherever we are, at all times. When we glorify God, we enter into

full communion with God. We are as close as we can possibly be to God when we love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind, and with all our strength. Then, with that in mind, we also move closer to God whenever we love our neighbor as our self. After all, the Spirit of truth reminds us that Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matt. 25:40).

The English pop singer, Cliff Richard, visited a Bahari refugee camp in Bangladesh. He says the first morning he must have washed his hands a dozen times. He didn’t want to touch anything, least of all, the people. Everyone was covered with sores and scabs. He says, “I was bending down to one little (boy), mainly for the photographer’s benefit, and trying hard not to have too close a contact. Just then, someone accidentally stood on the child’s fingers. He screamed and, as a reflex, I grabbed him, forgetting his dirt and sores. I remember that warm little body clinging to me and the crying instantly stopping. In that moment I knew I had much to learn about practical Christian loving, but that at least I’d started.” (Lectionary Homiletics, June 2001, p. 7) When Cliff Richard heard and responded to the cry of the human heart, as he moved closer and quickly to hold that crying and needy child, he moved closer to God. He glorified God by showing love and compassion to a neighbor in need. When we love one another, we also express our love to God, and God is glorified.

“When the Spirit of truth comes,” Jesus said, “he will guide you into all the truth.” We not only remember these words of Jesus, due to the help of the Holy Spirit, we also seek to live by these words – again, by the help of the Holy Spirit. Here at First Presbyterian, we are trying to listen very carefully these days to the Holy Spirit in order to discern how we can best do God’s will by serving our community. We have heard God calling Jenny Spivey to come and be with us and serve as one of the pastors, one minister among all of these ministers. And now, we are seeking to hear how God would use us all to serve this community to the glory of God’s name. As we move closer and closer to our neighbors, especially those in need, surely we move closer and closer to the God, who has moved closer and closer to us.

So, that’s why I preach on the Trinity and why we believe in the triune God. We can do no less for, by grace, God has revealed himself to us as the one God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Let us do our best to live for and to give glory to the one God – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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