

John 16:12-15

“The Holy Trinity”

by Vicar Albert Romkema

Introduction

Today is a special day on the church calendar. It is the only feast day which is not a celebration of a person or an event (like Christmas, Easter, or Pentecost) in the entire church year. This is a *doctrinal* feast day, that is to say it is a feast day dedicated to a doctrine, the doctrine of the Trinity.

Our services in the Lutheran church are full of this doctrine. Simply think about all the times that Pastor Jeff (and we in response) makes the sign of the cross during a typical service and you will see how often we mention the Trinity. Making the sign of the cross is a gesture symbolizing the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).

The first words of our liturgy to begin the *Confession and Forgiveness* portion of the service are: “In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”, then our sins are forgiven, also in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Likewise, to end the service we conclude with the same ancient formula.

Furthermore when we baptise our children we do so in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Why not just baptize in the name of Jesus, or God? Why don’t we baptize in the *names* (plural) of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, why is it just the *name* (singular)?

And finally when we die, as the casket is put into the ground we say “Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, and dust to dust, in sure and certain hope in our Lord Jesus Christ - in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Even our Augsburg Confession begins in article 1 (not article 2, or 5, or 10) with a statement of our belief in the 3 persons of one divine essence: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

So, we as Lutherans are steeped in the tradition of the Trinity from birth to death; from liturgy to Confession – we are Trinitarian people. What we believe hinges on this doctrine of the Trinity, it breathes outward from our worship experience to our life-involvement of *God with us* who informs our lives

...yet... we speak about the Trinity so sparingly. Many pastors avoid preaching on this doctrine altogether. I don’t know any better so I will give it a try today.

But why is this so? What difference does it make, really, how well we understand this doctrine? How can we best live with the mystery of the Trinity as a way of informing our activities as Christians and enlivening in us the mission of the church in the world today?

Well, stay tuned, this will be the subject of today’s sermon.

Body of Text

The Trinity in the Bible

It is perhaps important to realize that the word *Trinity* does not appear in the New Testament; it was not even mentioned until approximately 200 years after Jesus' death and resurrection when it was used by the theologian Tertullian (160-225 AD). And then it was not until 325 AD that the Council of Nicea formalized the idea of the Trinity in the Nicene Creed; and again attempts were made to further define the Trinity in the seldom used Athanasius Creed over 100 years later.

Don't worry; we will not be reciting this creed today, although some churches do, on this day alone in the church calendar. When I read the Athanasian Creed I always feel grace slipping away – there seems a pull toward works-based theology. I will never forget one person saying to me once, after reciting the creed together in a church service, “well, according to this, I am going to hell.”

But, back to the Trinity, that is not to say there is no mention of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the bible because there is. Several texts use a Trinitarian structure where Jesus, God, and Holy Spirit are held together. For instance, in Matthew 28:19 Jesus instructs his disciples to baptise in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Our gospel text for today too speaks of how the Holy Spirit embodies what is of Jesus who is of the Father.

When we think about the Trinity (3 in 1) as a concept, however, it becomes very abstract quickly. How can the three persons of the Trinity be one being? We hear summary statements like: *the Son is God but is not the Father or the Holy Spirit; the Father is God but is not the Son or the Holy Spirit; and the Holy Spirit is God but is not the Father or the Son*. It gets complicated and is not always helpful.

The Trinity in our Lives

The problem I think is that a *concept* does not sustain us; it is in *relationship* or *experience* that our lives are sustained and transformed. For instance, if you speak about how you love your spouse you might say it is because he/she is fun, a good cook, makes me happy etc. but a list like this sounds more like a shopping list than a description of a deep knowing; it just doesn't get there. It doesn't reflect the deep peace this person makes you feel or the way you can share your deepest experiences of life in a way that helps you discover yourself through your partner.

It is the same way with the Trinity. If you focus too much on the concept of 3 in 1 it is easy to get lost in the jargon: saying things like $1+1+1=1$ for instance. Descriptive words alone cannot explain what the Trinity is to itself or how Father, Son, and Holy Spirit combine in order to give itself away infinitely through an intimate relationship within each one of us; continually drawing us into itself, ever deeper, through the yearning for Truth and unity that the Holy Spirit implants in our hearts and souls. I think it is more about our Trinitarian *participation* that our Trinitarian *understanding*.

In today's text Jesus focuses not on *what* the Trinity is but on *how* the Trinity is; it is about relationship to the very core.

“He (the Holy Spirit) will not speak on his own...He will bring glory to me (Jesus) by taking what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine.”

There is implied an interdependence, a complete relationship, to the identity of God. All that God is is given, received, and shared. Nothing is withheld – all of the Father is in Jesus, all of Jesus is in the Holy Spirit... and all this is declared to us. Our character then, is a *living fellowship* rooted in the Trinity. Here is an illustration which might be helpful:

The Body of Christ

A few years ago I visited the University of California, at Irvine. While there I went to see an art exhibit by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer titled *Pulse Room*. It was set up in a large amphitheatre-type hall with no windows and only one entrance. As I walked into the mostly darkened space my eyes were drawn upward where there were 300 light bulbs individually suspended approximately 10 feet from the ceiling. Each of the bulbs was pulsating at a slightly different rate – flickering on and off.

Walking into the hall I could only move about 10 or 15 feet forward before reaching a platform with a metal hand-rail at its end. Instructions were written beside the rail to grasp the rail with both hands. So, I did this, and suddenly the entire room went dark, all the pulsating lights were extinguished.

Then, after a few seconds, a single light bulb, suspended another 5 feet below all the others, and right in front of where I was standing, began to flicker, on/off, on/off – all on its own. Then the nearest bulb above it began to flicker at the same rate, while the first was extinguished. After a few more seconds all the other light bulbs began flickering again, at their own intervals, mine included.

It turns out that monitors in the hand-rail had detected my heart beat and sent the pulse of my own heart to the lower bulb and then upward to the wide array of other bulbs, each then beating at each person’s particular heart rate who had participated in the exhibit. Each time someone grasped the hand rail a new and unique rhythm was added to the array of bulbs. I experienced it as a profound statement of unity in diversity.

The exhibit helped me understand what Paul meant in 1 Corinthians 12:27 when he called followers of Christ the *Body of Christ*, and named each one of us as part of this body – each unique in what it could add to the Body yet all connected as well. We are brought together in this way through baptism (remember the 2 baptisms we celebrated here a few weeks ago).

At our baptisms the Holy Spirit, informed through the Father and Son, transmits and communicates faith into the deepest recesses of our souls as the water is poured over our heads. We receive the gift of faith through our baptism. And then we affirm our baptisms at confirmation like we saw here last Sunday with our 9 confirmands.

All along we, as a congregation, declare our commitment as a community of faith, as the Body of Christ, to walk with the newly baptized and the newly confirmed – that is a *living fellowship* of the Body of Christ, insinuated into our souls by a Trinitarian God and proclaimed in one voice through our

liturgy. We mirror Trinitarian fellowship in our lives together. We are connected, all things are connected as the Trinity defines relationship, there is nothing missing anywhere.

You see, the Trinity it is not limited to 3 persons. There is an ongoing dance of God's love with all of creation, and we are all invited to join in too.

If we lean into it a little we may come to realize that although we are not God, we are also *not other* than God; although we are not each other (I am not you, you are not me), we are also *not other* than each other; and although we are not the earth, we are also *not other* than the earth.

Eventually we may get the courage to say, *I am a portion of that which I am looking for*. In this moment, the idea of God as transcendent shifts to a realization that God is imminent. There is a hidden wholeness which connects us all. Our hearts beat individually, yet together, as one body in the fellowship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Our Call to Mission

Perhaps understanding the essence of the three persons of the Trinity may help us with our mission also. The Trinity reveals the *creative, teaching, and mystical* nature of God: that is, the essence of God is that God creates; the essence of Jesus is as teacher, to show us how to live; and the essence of the Holy Spirit is the mystical presence of God in our lives (living within each of us).

As children of God, made in the image of God, we are invited to live in this same fullness.

So - speaking of the Father: When we access our imagination, our creativity, while searching for ways to engage each other, the community of Stratford with God's message of love and hope... *then we are answering the Father's call to creative Christian living.*

Practically, this does not have to be complicated – last week I was speaking with a member of the congregation who was recalling how she had been looking for a home a number of years ago to live in after selling her house. She could not find anything and was in a panic. Knowing this, another couple had gone by a new development and noticed there might be rooms available...so they went in and checked, got a contact name and number and brought it to this person. She is still living there today, happily. That is the creativity of God living through us and our activity with each other.

Speaking of the Son: When our commitment is steady to learning and testing our learning as a community, what Jesus is teaching us today in God's Word, and then living out of this learning... *then we are answering the call of the Son who is our teacher.*

This might look like attending one of the two bible study classes we offer here at Zion (ask one of the attendees how enjoyable pastor Jeff's Monday evening bible studies have been – you might be surprised by the enthusiastic response you receive).

Or perhaps this call to learn from Christ's teaching comes through discussing the Sunday service after leaving church with our families – what did we learn, what did we struggle with. We often remember these discussions in more detail than the actual sermon or service.

Or perhaps learning about what it is to be follower of Christ follows a commitment to discuss with our children what they learned in confirmation class that week. Over the last few weeks we spoke at length about grace, worship, and doubt. I have been continually surprised by the insights of our confirmands.

Speaking of the Holy Spirit: When we allow time for silence, quiet reflection, and prayer in our lives - perhaps here in church (even during the service), or at home with our families, or while taking a walk in the woods - to perceive and respond to the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit while allowing the Spirit to inform our communal activities... *then we are allowing the mystical work of the Spirit to be our guide.*

The Spirit of God is like our breath. It animates our lives, offering gifts of faith (already at our baptism), love, forgiveness, kindness, goodness, gentleness, peace, and joy. Practically speaking, we test our deep listening in conversation with those around us, interpreting the work of the Spirit together as a community. That is why conversation/dialogue is so important within our fellowship.

Each aspect of the Trinity helps us answer God's invitation to love and serve our communities in an identity rooted in the fellowship of the Triune God.

Conclusion

A concluding thought - don't forget about joy. In the core of the Trinity laughing, feasting, and birthing go on continually. Meister Eckhart says, "The Father laughs with the Son; the Son laughs with the Father. The Father likes the Son; the Son likes the Father. The Father delights in the Son; the Son delights in the Father. The Father loves the Son; the Son loves the Father. This laughter, liking, delighting, and loving *is* the Holy Spirit," inviting us to surrender to the love that is hopelessly in love with us – pursuing us, accessing our hearts, giving itself away in the ordinary experiences of our lives.

Perhaps this says enough – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit laughing, liking, delighting, and loving... and calling us to do the same; to see through Father's eyes, heal with the hands of Christ, discern with ears of the Holy Spirit, and love with the heart of the Triune God.

Amen