

God: Three in One – May 22, 2016

Trinity Sunday

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A few years ago I attended a fly-fishing retreat for breast cancer survivors. One of the other cancer survivors began telling me about her faith. That happens quite often when people find out you're a pastor. This woman had been a Christian all her life and had always had what she thought was a strong relationship with God. She prayed often, was active in church, read her Bible. Yet she had just realized something. Something that struck her rather profoundly. She had always prayed to God the Father or prayed to Jesus. But then she began to give more thought to the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. She felt like she had been ignoring the Spirit all the years prior and she wasn't really sure why.

I remember a conversation I had while visiting a college friend in Warsaw, IN. It was right before Pentecost, so Dianne and I got into a conversation about what happened at Pentecost - when the Holy Spirit came to the early disciples and how that event was often referred to as the birth of the church. She admitted that she "just didn't get" the Holy Spirit. God the Creator – she was okay with that concept. And she could certainly understand Jesus. No problem there. But the confusion came when she tried to understand the Holy Spirit. For her, and for many people, the Holy Spirit is perplexing.

Add to that the overall confusion we experience when we try to understand the doctrine of the Trinity, and our minds frantically struggle to grasp the complexity of the concept. Whether we use the traditional names Father, Son and Holy Spirit, or an alternate view of the Trinity, such as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, the math just doesn't seem to add up. God in Three Persons, blessed Trinity – one God, three persons. Three somehow equals one. No matter how someone attempts to explain the Trinity, the conversation usually ends with "well, it's all just really a mystery about God and we just have to have faith."

The discrepancy in the math isn't the only problem. We're just not sure what to call the Holy Spirit. Or more accurately, we don't really know what pronoun to use. For the most part we refer to God the Father as "he." We don't mean that we believe that God is a man or is male. We could just as easily call God "she" or God the Mother. Because we were created in God's image – both male and female, we believe that God has the qualities of both genders. The Bible uses both masculine and feminine traits in reference to God. Yet Jesus called God Father, so traditionally we use the masculine pronoun.

Jesus, as the Incarnation of God, took the form of a human male, so we refer to Jesus as "he." In the context of his life on earth, it was still a male-dominated society, so it made complete sense for him to take the form of a man. Yet, Jesus pushed the boundaries of male and female interactions during his time on earth. He treated women with respect and included them among his followers.

And then there is the Holy Spirit. I have sometimes heard people refer to the spirit as "it," as if the Spirit were a thing. Yet the Spirit is personal. As part of the Trinity, we believe the Spirit is one of the three distinct Persons of the Godhead. In Hebrew, the word for spirit is "nuema"

which is feminine. Also, in the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament, oftentimes God's Spirit is linked to the personification of wisdom. The Hebrew word for wisdom is also a feminine word. The pronoun "she" is a perfectly appropriate pronoun to use in reference to the Holy Spirit.

And it makes sense. Given what I mentioned before, if we believe that humans were created in God's image, then as we humans are both male and female, so too does God share masculine and feminine traits. Yet no matter what pronoun you use, if any, just remember that the Spirit is indeed personal. I think that the woman I met at the cancer retreat had a sort of epiphany in her understanding of God. She had previously thought of the Holy Spirit in non-personal terms, but came to the sudden realization that the Spirit is indeed personal and fully God.

I think this illustrates why the Holy Spirit is often neglected in the church. We talk about God, we talk about Jesus, but we're not sure what to say about the Spirit. Pentecost and Trinity Sunday are the big days that we talk about Her. But for much of the remainder of the year, we say little about the Spirit. In the Apostles Creed, for example, we say much about what we believe about God the Father and about Jesus – but about the Spirit we affirm our belief in the Spirit and the Spirit's role in the conception of Jesus. That's about it. Even in the hymnals – there are loads of hymns that focus specifically on God and Jesus, and only a few that have the Spirit as the main focus.

There are also some misconceptions about the Spirit. We think of the Holy Spirit, as Jesus talks about her. When Jesus is speaking to his disciples prior to his death, he assures them that he will not abandon them nor leave them as orphans. He promises to send the Holy Spirit to serve as their advocate – the Spirit will instruct and teach and guide and interpret. This is the Spirit of Christ, who comes from the Father.

So sometimes we might think that the Spirit did not exist prior to Christ. And then the Spirit comes onto the scene at Pentecost. Yet the Holy Spirit was present in the very act of Creation. The Spirit of God hovered over the waters of chaos as God spoke the Word to Create. We make a similar mistake about Jesus, thinking that he did not exist prior to the Incarnation. Yet, from the prologue of the Gospel of John, we know that Jesus has been with and a part of God also from the beginning.

As confusing as these scripture references and doctrines seem to be, the bottom line for us is not walking out of here today confident that we understand exactly what this all means. We don't need to be able to share the nuts and bolts as to how Father, Son and Holy Spirit equal one God. We don't have to understand the "how" of it. What we do need to understand is this. **Why** is it important?

Why is the doctrine of the Trinity important to your daily walk as a Christian disciple? Does it matter if you pray to Jesus today and then pray to God the Father tomorrow? Let's take another look at that woman I met at the cancer survivor retreat. She told me that she felt guilty for neglecting the Holy Spirit. And this was really bothering her. Like she had offended God in some way by NOT praying to the Spirit all these years. I told her that God understands our confusion. God gets it. We who are limited by time and space could never hope to fathom the depth of

God's being. And God knows that. We learn, we grow, we draw closer to God in this life, our journey of faith.

It is the Holy Spirit within us that allows that growth to occur. The Spirit is God within us. The Spirit is God around us. The Spirit of God is active in us and in the world. At the moment of our baptism, we are claimed by God, and we are sealed by God's Spirit.

I have sometimes struggled to get my mind around that image, that concept of being sealed by the Spirit. When I think of a sealant, I get an image in my mind of my grandmother who used to do all sorts of crafty things, like decoupage. She'd take an item like a can or a box and would affix various pictures to it. They might be stamps or cutouts from a magazine or catalogue. After covering the item with the pictures, she would then use a small paintbrush and coat the surface of the decorated item with varnish or glue, some type of sealant that would finish the project by making it look smooth and protecting it from damage. The seal protected it. With that image, I return to baptism. We are sealed by the Spirit of God – we come under God's protection – not in the sense that we will never experience harm or hardship – but that the Spirit comes into us and lives in and works through us.

Another definition of seal is equally applicable. When I hear the word seal, I am reminded of those images from the Middle Ages where someone would write a letter, fold it, then pour wax on it to close it. Using a signet ring or stamp, the person would press his/her seal into the hot wax. Each seal was unique, and so the particular seal both ensured privacy and proved the authenticity of the document writer.

In the same way, when we are sealed by God through the Holy Spirit, we are stamped by God with God's unique seal. We are claimed, we are authenticated. We are brought into the family of faith, into the community of the faithful. As Paul writes in his letter to the church in Rome, we have been adopted into God's family and we can call out Abba, Father to God, and God will hear us. We are sons and daughters, united with all God's beloved children.

And here's what is important to understand about the doctrine of the Trinity. One of the ways of explaining the Trinity is to use a concept from the Orthodox church that is called perichoresis. In perichoresis, you have this image of the Trinity as three persons, hand in hand, joined together in an eternal dance. Never letting go of one another, never acting alone, but always acting in and through each other. Completely loving and accepting each other and sharing in each other's work. Nothing is done alone, but also in community.

Our God is the epitome of community. As humans, we are part of the community of the human race the moment we are born. As Christians, we become part of the community of the faithful the moment we are baptized. We have brothers and sisters in all times and places. We work and learn and grow and worship and pray – all in community. We cry and mourn in community. We rejoice and laugh in community. We sin and we confess and we repent and we are forgiven in community. God is community, God is love – God is love in community. If you don't remember anything else about the Trinity, remember that. God is love in community.