

Trinity Sunday – June 11, 2017
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There is a legend that says that once, while St Augustine was contemplating the mystery of the Trinity, he was walking along a sandy beach. He saw a boy on the beach who had dug out a deep hole in the sand. The boy was filling the hole with water, going back and forth to the ocean to bring back more water to pour into the hole. St Augustine paused for a moment and then asked the boy, "What are you doing?" The boy replied with confidence, "I am going to pour the entire ocean into this hole." Augustine scoffed and said to him, "That is impossible. The whole ocean will not fit into the hole you have made." And the boy replied to him, "And yet you try to fit the trinity into your tiny little brain." And then the boy disappeared.

Each year Trinity Sunday rolls around on the church calendar, immediately following Pentecost, and preachers everywhere beginning quaking in their robes. The question becomes - How to bring this conundrum to a place of clarity and understanding. It is heartening to hear this legend about St. Augustine and his inability to fully grasp the trinity, a doctrine that has been discussed and debated since the fourth century. And that's the reality of the situation. None of us will walk out of here today understanding the concept of the trinity. How can we be monotheistic, believing in one God, yet affirm three distinct persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit? It just doesn't make sense to our limited human minds. We cannot and will not ever fully grasp its truth.

People have tried. Various analogies have been used in an attempt to understand the trinity in concrete terms. One of the most popular, especially with kids, is the water analogy. Water can exist in three different states of matter, solid as a cube of ice, liquid, as the stuff that pours from your kitchen faucet, or gas, as steam rises from a boiling kettle. But even though each state of matter has different properties, the water still retains its chemical composition, H₂O. It's still water.

But this is the old modalism heresy. Meaning, that if we try to transfer this analogy to God, then like water, God can only assume one mode at a time. God the Father in one instance, then becomes the Holy Spirit at another point, and then assumes the mode of Jesus Christ at still another point. While it may seem to work at first glance, in the end it just doesn't hold water.

Perhaps you've heard the egg analogy. Take an egg. You have the shell, the egg white and the yolk. You need all three to make an egg. You can't have one without the other two and still have a whole egg. That part of the analogy works. Because the three persons of the trinity cannot exist apart from one another. However, the parts of an egg are completely separate and distinct, and the persons of the Trinity are not. We understand the persons of the Trinity sharing complete oneness.

Then there's the analogy of personal roles. Take any human being. Based upon situation or context, that same human being lives out a variety of roles. A particular woman might be a wife, a mother, a daughter, a doctor, or a volunteer. This role idea is really not a bad analogy for God, and I think it's a somewhat safe starting point, even for older children. It describes one person with three different roles. In a way, this sort of sounds like the Trinity, doesn't it? God having three different functions. Yet still the analogy ultimately fails, because when we are talking about God, the underlying assumption is that God is three persons, not one person with three distinct roles.

One of the clearest ways for me to understand the Doctrine of the Trinity is the concept of perichoresis. The word comes from two Greek words meaning "to make room for" and "around." We can thank our Eastern Orthodox brothers and sisters for this helpful concept, which describes, and helps us to comprehend, the relationship between the three persons of the Trinity. Reformed theologian Dr. Shirley Guthrie describes it as "Father, Son and Holy Spirit are like three dancers, holding hands, dancing around together in joyful freedom." Now, it's hard not to picture this image in our minds and not see three separate entities. Imagine three of us

getting up, holding hands, and dancing together. We're still three separate people, and once we let go of our hands, we can go our separate ways.

But as we understand the relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we believe that the three persons of the Trinity cannot exist outside of their relationship to one another. Father, Son and Holy Spirit only exist in this relationship and cannot exist outside of it. That is the key. They can't drop their hands and go their separate ways. They "live only in, with and through one another, eternally united in mutual love and shared purpose" (Guthrie, pg. 40 – Always Being Reformed) This image evokes total equality. There is no hierarchy. No person of the trinity is greater than another. Sometimes we imagine God the Father as some sort of C.E.O. with Jesus and the Holy Spirit at a lower level. But that is not an accurate portrayal.

Inside the Godhead, there is only a community of equals living with and for one another. Why is this important for us to know? If we were created in God's image, then this emphasis on community within God's own self teaches what community ought to look like for us - community not only as Christians with one another, but also in the larger context of the world as human beings. When we understand this point of God existing in community, we realize how truly important mutual and loving relationships are between human beings.

We can see a somewhat similar idea of working within community when we look at the Doctrine of the Church. The church is regularly referred to as Christ's body. The church is a community of followers of Christ, working together to live out and share the message of the good news of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul writes about the importance of all the members of the body in his first letter to the church in the city of Corinth. Every part of the body is necessary and unique in its role and function of keeping the body whole and active. No part should feel unimportant or weak or less than another within the body, because every single part is needed for the full-functioning and well-being of the body.well, maybe not the appendix!

But as we individuals make up the community of Christ's body in the church, we each have our place to be and our job to fulfill. The things we do may change over time, due to our own circumstances or current situations in life. Maybe we don't have the time or energy that we once had or will have in the future. But everyone is needed and everyone is valued and each work you do on behalf of Christ within and for the church is appreciated.

In just a few minutes, following the hymn, we will be taking the time to recognize and thank you for the ways you function and serve within the body of First Presbyterian. Whatever you do within this body is valued and necessary. You don't often get to hear the words "thank you" – or not often enough – but I hope you all understand how appreciated you are.