

Sermon
McCarter Presbyterian Church
Trinity Sunday
June 16, 2019

Old Testament Lesson

Isaiah 63:7-14

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

John 16:12–15 NRSV

“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

The Trinity: Wrapping It Up

You may have seen James, or someone like him where you live. He ran a small business just down the road. The liquor store he owned had its headaches and risks, but it provided a good living. Despite his success, James fretted over the business constantly. There was the temptation to keep a set of “special” books, since so many transactions were in cash. His friends were right: This accounting trick did lead to significant savings in taxes. The extra cash helped them prepare for the college expenses coming up for his two daughters. And, there were other ways to get ahead. The suppliers were always open to a discount, if you asked properly. (Feeding those delivery guys with homemade barbecue went a long way to getting those deals.) And, he had hired assistant managers when they opened the other store across town last year. Now, he had more time for the family and his daughters’ AAU volleyball team. Everything at the church was going okay, too. The preacher rarely asked about his business dealings, and in return James always gave generously, when he was asked.

Things were going pretty well, but James felt as if he were **three different people**: a conscientious business man, a loving father and decent husband, and a regularly attending Christian who **believed in God** and read the *Bible* and prayed often. But, lately he prayed that all of this would not catch up with him and overwhelm him. People knew him pretty well, but their knowledge of him **depended on the context**, or situation, in which they encountered him. His business colleagues thought he was **shrewd** and clever, his family regarded him as loving and available, and his pastor just wasn’t sure that he knew him at all.

To most people, it looked like everything was going very well for James. But, every morning when he looked into the mirror, He felt that he was on the edge of something. Whether that was total success or ultimate failure, he did not know. But, the reality was this: He would be **these three persons**, for the time being.

Well, James is a fictional character: knowable, but a just a little obscure, depending on the context in which you knew him or, rather, this description of him. But, I think it can help us start a serious **discussion** on a pretty confusing topic: **the Trinity**, traditionally described as **Father, Son, and Holy Spirit**. Over time, more gender-neutral terms are used, as well **Creator, Savior, and Comforter** or Sustainer:

These words describe the **Trinity** pretty well. But, things get murky when we rush into an explanation of **God** as **Three-in-One**. There is good reason for this: The Trinity is an attempt to explain God verbally and **theologically**. It gets even tougher when we try to represent the Trinity **visually**. The image on the cover of the bulletin today (*below, p. 5*) is an attempt at this: three aspects of God in symbols which **interlock** and are **surrounded** by an enclosing **circle**. These three aspects of God are within the **unity of God**, which is represented with the surrounding border of the circle. Clear as mud, right?

As you might have guessed, this morning is **Trinity Sunday**. Its placement in our lectionary, the schedule of scripture and topics for Sunday worship, is calculated and intentional. It follows **Pentecost** each year. There is no single, great time to take up the Trinity, after all. So, the overarching question for me and or all of you is this: How does the Trinity relate to **our faith**? And, what is **the source** for something so downright perplexing?

Well, to start with, let's look at the **scriptural source** of the Trinity. I will save you some time and energy: Search as long as you like, there is **no reference** to "the Trinity" in scripture or, at least, it is not named as such. Certainly, the **theology** behind is evident, but it is not neatly contained in a single epistle from Paul or in a single Gospel. This term Trinity, or **Triune God**, is a construct of the early church: something that was **created** as part of our liturgy and tradition. The earliest reference to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is a dead heat between writer of **Matthew** and **Paul**:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.
Matthew 28:19-20a (NRSV)

And, we have this lovely benediction from Paul's writings in *2 Corinthians*:

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 13:13 (NRSV)

The scripture from *Matthew* dates to about the year 80-90 in the first century of the Common Era. So, this portion of the text was probably part of the liturgy for the **baptism of converts and infants** in the early church. Of course, we still use it today: It is essential to the baptism itself, since we are calling on **God's Spirit** to enter our presence and to **remain with those who are newly baptized**. Having been **saved** through Jesus Christ, during this time of addressing God's **Spirit**, we acknowledge that we are all **creations** of Almighty God. Digging a little deeper, we find that this inclusion of the Trinity was dictated as a **necessity** in the "instruction manual" for the early church through a manuscript know as the *Didache*, or, the "Teaching." A portion of it reads:

And concerning baptism, baptize this way: Having first said all these things, baptize into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in living water. But if you have no living water, baptize into other water; and if you cannot do so in cold water, do so in warm. But if you have neither, pour out water three times upon the head into the name of Father and Son and Holy Spirit (*Didache*, Chapter 7).

As you can tell, traditions such as the Trinity, and our **liturgy**, tie us back to the **earliest days of worship**. A couple of hundred years after Paul and the creation of *Matthew*, the *Nicene Creed* tried to work out the Trinity in detail. As a practical matter, the *Apostles Creed* offers up a condensed version of the Trinity, as well. You might say that the concept of God being known in **three ways** was part of **the language of the church**, an early-day form of “church speak”: God the **Creator**, Christ our **Savior**, and the ever-present **Holy Spirit**.

And, scholars and theologians agree that it remains difficult to describe our experience of God. It should not surprise us that the early church was having trouble with interpreting their experience of God. Likely, this difficulty they encountered led to the description of God in **three ways**. Let’s examine how this could have happened:

- When we arise in the morning and see a glorious sunrise, we get a glimpse of the power and beauty of **God as Creator**.
- We experience God’s love and **grace** through Christ when we realize that we can never rid ourselves of conceit and selfish behavior, that this is part of our sinful nature that send us back to God repeatedly asking for God’s **mercy** through **Jesus Christ**.
- And, we understand the presence of **God’s Spirit** with us when we tell our spouse or closest friend that the contract fell through and there will be no bonus, no new car, and no vacation this year; or, that your mother has fallen or that your youngest child or grandchild is very ill.

Simply stated, the Trinity is an expression of **human experience**. Because it arises from imperfect beings, humans, it is limited in scope and **inadequate** in its description. In that respect, it is like my trying to tell my loved ones how much I love them. The **language** seems **inadequate** for the task, because our minds, and especially the language that we use and the way that we communicate, are so very **restricted** in comparison with what we are trying to describe. This is only magnified in trying to **describe God**.

And, here is where the **Trinity** comes in to help us. It gives us something on which to start “hanging” things. Despite the term being absent from scripture, it provides a useful **framework** on which to place items about God and **our experience** of God. With that in hand, we can begin to examine these aspects we know of God: We begin to work them and shape them and begin to gain some understanding of **God’s power**, God’s **presence**, and our **interaction** with God.

Now, in this light the **gift of Jesus Christ** makes more sense. We are aware of **God's love and goodness** through Jesus Christ. And, as promised, **Christ ascended** to be with God again. Here the term **God the Father**, or Creator, neatly becomes part of our thinking. And, **Christ reigns** there in power with God. Despite this detachment and separation from us, we know that **God is present** with us. Of course, we would not be able to survive an encounter with God (*Exodus 3*), so **the Advocate, the Comforter, the Paraclete** in the Greek, is sent to remain present with us. And, that expression of God is **the Holy Spirit**.

Things have not always been so clear for us, especially in the past 100 years. This concept of God as supreme power took a drubbing during the close scrutiny of modern thinking which is known as the **Enlightenment**. But, the concepts of God took a truly **negative turn** during, and after, World War II in Europe. Hitler had forced **the German church** to restate its theology: placing **Hitler** as head of the church, displacing Christ and God and substituting for the Holy Spirit. Thoughtful Christians and their leaders knew that this was a heresy. Some refused to accept it, but there was a lot of pressure on everyone. Most of the pastors in Germany were paid by the state, who also owned the churches. As a result, the vast majority of the German church accepted this overarching influence of government. Some famous church leaders and theologians opposed this., leading to the Barmen Declaration, opposing Hitler and the Nazi regime. **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** and **Karl Barth** were among the more famous theologians who opposed this National Socialist (Nazi) Party takeover of the German Church. Bonhoeffer paid with his **life**, and Karl Barth was **deported** to his native Switzerland.

This is important, because both of these great theologians and church leaders spoke to truth. This time after World War II became a crisis in the church in Europe. **Bonhoeffer** was **murdered** on Hitler's order just days prior to the German surrender. But, Bonhoeffer did influence **Karl Barth**. And, much of what we proclaim in the PC (USA) is derived from the efforts of Karl Barth through the remainder of his career. This remarkable pastor, teacher, and theologian placed consistent perspective on the roles of **God's sovereignty**, the gift of **Jesus Christ** as the key to our salvation, and the role of **God's Spirit** which remains with us. He painstakingly related these principles and doctrine to **scripture and tradition**. It was his lifelong work, expressed in his *Commentary on Romans* and his more famous major work, *Church Dogmatics*. This last work was monumental. In it, Barth revisited the writings of **Paul** and the traditions of the **Reformed faith** through an all-encompassing and consistent filter. One of the chief threads of thought that Barth developed remains with us in the Presbyterian Church (USA): We cannot help but **respond in kind** to the incredible and undeserved gift of **God's grace** shown to us in Jesus Christ. For Barth, through faith we are living out our lives in imitation of Christ and in **service to God**. Barth called this living our life **in Christ**.

Of course, all of this derives from the **writings** which we hold as scripture. These were composed and written long before the terms and theology about the **Trinity** were put together. So, we have to understand all of scripture as very gifted, but human attempts to **describe the indescribable**. And, that is the intersection with scripture in the *Gospel of John* where God's Son is present as **the Word**.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.

John 1:1-3a, 10 (NRSV)

In *John*, the **Word of God** comes into its own, referring to the essence of God's Son, Jesus, directly relating Christ to **the very being of God**. All of this ties back to **God's sovereignty, God's will, God's all-knowing presence**, and the far-reaching and infinite knowledge that God possesses. Throughout this gospel, *John* describes the great mystery that is **God**. And, this mystery intersects with our faith every day. The Trinity is a visual and theological concept of describing this **mystery** of the single, all powerful, **Triune God**.

In the beginning of our time together, I asked us to look at God in ways that matched up with our **experiences** of God. The early church reduced this to **three consistent descriptions**. That is: **God in Three Persons**. If asked, we likely would admit that the **Trinity** is the one thing we least understand in our **worship** and in our faith practices. It would be easy to assume that it was a fiction, except for the body of evidence that we have before us. So, if you wonder about this, I can reassure you that you and I are not alone.

However, we know that **the Trinity** came about because those in the early church had to struggle to describe their experience of God in **prayer** and in **worship** and in **ministry**. They were encountering God in the **daily walk** of their lives, **transformed** by they experience of God in **Jesus Christ**. And, we have significant evidence in our scripture lesson today that within about 30 years of the death of Jesus this language of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit was part of the everyday description of **life and worship** in the early church.

Today is **Trinity Sunday**. All around the world, pastors are grappling with this entity, this concept, or **ignoring it** altogether. Despite its opponents and detractors, I hope this at least stimulates your thinking and **challenges your faith** in some new and deeper way. As we have said, we experience the Trinity in a variety of ways, but we can articulate this fairly consistently: God as **Creator**, God as **Savior**, and God as **Spirit**.

These **experiences** of God **ARE** the Trinity. And, they more than adequately describe **our encounter with God**: each and every day.

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