

Sermon: Trinity Sunday, June 11, 2017 Romans 12: 9-21
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

God in Three Persons, Blessed Trinity.

There may be no Christian doctrine that has been more divisive, than the doctrine of the Trinity. While it may strike our 21st century minds as a theological construct that we can accept, or not accept, or adapt as needed, the debate over this doctrine has been bloody. Back in the days of the Church Councils of the fourth century, theologians with strongly-held opinions hammered away at each other with the fierceness of a full-contact football drill, and when one faction won and the other was banished, the fight literally spilled out onto the street. As described by historian Will Durant, in the two years following the Council of Nicaea, Christian-on-Christian violence, largely based on one's beliefs on the Trinity, accounted for more deaths in those two years than the total killed in centuries of Roman persecution of Christians.

Fortunately, that has settled down, but there remain so many ways to approach this difficult, nearly incomprehensible doctrine. I'm going to slowly scan what a number of authors have said about the Trinity on screen, both pro and con, giving a few moments to ponder each one:

- Christian author BC Crothers (2013) – I write it, yet it is Jesus who speaks through me. I move, yet it is God working through me. I look, yet it is the Spirit who sees through me. Truly, the Trinity lives.
- Theologian Michael Servetus (1531) who burned at the stake for his assertions – In the Bible, there is no mention of the Trinity... we get to know God, not through our proud philosophical concepts, but through Christ.
- Archbishop Desmond Tutu (ca. 2010) – Isn't it wonderful that we have this Doctrine of the Trinity that speaks of God as a fellowship, a community. So, you have this wonderful image of the community that is God, the Trinity.
- Novelist Brando Skyhorse (2010) – Faith is a luxury for those of us who are able to ignore what the rest of us must see every day. Pessimism, Distrust, and Irony are the Holy Trinity of *my* Religion. Irony in Particular.
- Christian and Missionary Alliance Pioneer A.W. Tozer (1965) – The doctrine of the Trinity...is truth for the heart. The fact that it cannot be satisfactorily explained, instead of being against it, is in its favor. Such a truth had to be revealed, no one could imagine it.
- Scholar Karen Armstrong (2010) – Jesus did not spend a great deal of time discoursing about the trinity or original sin or the incarnation, which have preoccupied later Christians. He went around doing good and being compassionate.
- (one day after our denomination's 92nd birthday...) The United Church of Canada's *Song of Faith* (2006) - With the Church through the ages, we speak of God as one and triune: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We also speak of God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer; God, Christ, and Spirit; Mother, Friend, and Comforter; Source of Life, Living Word, and Bond of Love; and in other ways that speak faithfully of the One on whom our hearts rely, the fully shared life at the heart of the universe. We witness to Holy Mystery that is Wholly Love.
- Writer Anne Lamott (2005) – I didn't need to understand the hypostatic unity of the Trinity; I just needed to turn my life over to whoever came up with redwood trees.

Personally, my thoughts probably fall somewhere between those last two, the *Song of Faith* and Anne Lamott. I admit, with Ann Lamott, that my faith life does not really rise and fall with the specifics of the Trinity. Yet with the *Song of Faith*, I rejoice in the idea of the mystical union of God who is expressed as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, which suggests that there are many ways for us to feel connected to God. When I baptize in the name of this God who is both three-in-one and one-in-three, I affirm our connection to Christians throughout the ages and around the globe who have agreed to acknowledge one another's practice of baptism. When a benediction offers God's blessings in the name of Creator, Christ, and Spirit, there is a spiritual fullness to it that reaches beyond my intellectual comprehension.

What I do find, however, is that the Trinity, as a doctrine, isn't one of those beliefs that really propels me from faith to action. Whether I try to explain it through an organizational chart, as if Creator, Christ and Spirit are different departments of a Holy Bureaucracy, or through this image from the 13th century [see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shield_of_the_Trinity] which attempts to diagram the interrelationship

between the three persons of the Trinity, I end up frustrated by a theology that is more technical than personal. Yet when I look, one at a time, at each member of the Trinity, each of these ways I experience the fullness of God, I would be hard-pressed to say I'm not "trinitarian." For when Jesus says (in Matt.25:40), "Whatever you did unto the least of these, my sisters and brothers, you did unto me," it directly impacts how I live my life. When I see the majesty of Creator God expressed in the intricacy and immensity of nature, it directly impacts how I live my life. And when the Holy Spirit, acting through my conscience, pushes me to prove my belief that the power of love is stronger than the power of hatred, by actions of supportive love, radical hospitality and open-hearted inclusion, it directly impacts how I live my life. As a theological construct, the Trinity is okay-ish to me, but when I get past the doctrine and experience the wondrous God it describes, my beliefs and my actions get energized and all of it gets focused on God's agenda, not mine.

This need, for our connection to God to be reflected in both our beliefs and our actions, goes back to the very first Christians. In the 12th chapter of Romans, the Apostle Paul encourages the Church in his day and in ours with these words:

Love others well, and don't hide behind a mask; love authentically....pursue what is good as if your life depends on it. [Love] each other as sisters and brothers, be first to honor others by putting them first...Let your spirit be on fire, bubbling up and boiling over, as you serve the Lord. Do not forget to rejoice, for hope is always just around the corner. Hold up through the hard times that are coming, devote yourselves to prayer [and] take every opportunity to open your life and home to others.

If people mistreat or malign you, bless them....If some have cause to celebrate, join in the celebration. And if others are weeping, join in that as well. Work toward unity, live in harmony with one another [and] if it is within your power, make peace with all people. (abridged from *The Voice* translation)

If we take this energetic picture of Christian community, and imagine what kinds of thoughts might engender such actions, we will find much good theology: encouraging people to be authentic, expresses a trust in the God who gives us life; celebrating the overflowing joy of service, expresses a trust in the Spirit who equips us for courageous kindness; reminding us to share in the joys and sorrows of others, and work for harmony even when mistreated, expresses a trust in the Christ who is our companion on the journey of life. Paul's encouragement is to active expressions of love, and those loving actions will speak volumes about our belief & trust in God, three-in-one and one-in-three.

In this rather meandering exploration of the Holy Trinity, I suppose that is the take-home: the importance of both the words that describe our beliefs, and the actions that express our beliefs, in our quest to be drawn closer to the God of love. When we take a deep look at what we believe, we will see how these beliefs shape our actions; when we take a deep look at what we actually DO as disciples of Jesus, we will see evidence of the words and thoughts and actions that undergird those actions; and when we pause to reflect, we will do so amidst the Divine presence who brings it all to life. As disciples of Jesus Christ, as members of the human race, our lives rely on a rhythm of our words and our actions and the moments we rest in God. Even as we focus much of our energy on reaching out to others in love and respect, we do well to reflect on our words of belief, and to express gratitude for this God whom we rely on so completely.



As those who have argued Trinitarian theology over the centuries can attest to, God is complex. And so is our response to God: our words and our deeds and the silence between. Whether we find ourselves most drawn to God as Spirit, or Christ, or Mother and Creator, or would describe our spiritual yearnings in other ways, may our belief find expression in words of life, and lives of love. Amen.

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See also:

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