

Holy Trinity Sunday

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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What is today known as in the life of the church? Today is Holy Trinity Sunday. It's one of the more difficult Sundays to comprehend, and one of the few Sundays where a doctrine takes center stage - an odd doctrine at that. After all, Jesus didn't directly talk about the Trinity, and one of the most famous early Christians named Paul didn't really either. It wasn't until the fourth century, that's 300 years after Jesus, that Christian leaders formalized the idea of the Trinity with the Nicene Creed. Then in the fifth century Christian leaders wrote another creed trying, once again, to clarify the Jesus part of the Trinity with another creed, the Apostle's Creed. So, clearly there was some difficulty in understanding the Trinity. And then for generations we've been trying to explain the Trinity with these two creeds. We try to explain that Christians have one God in three persons, or one God in three beings, or one God in three spirits, or one God in three things. Sometimes we describe God as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; or we use the less patriarchal terms of creator, redeemer, and sustainer; others say presence, wisdom, and power; or even almighty God, incarnate word, and holy comforter. We try to grasp at this complex way of understanding the Trinity by using world examples as well. We compare the Trinity to an apple's seeds, skin, and flesh; or water in a solid, liquid, or vapor form; or

even flour, salt, and water coming together in dough.¹ We try, and then try again, to explain the Trinity.

In my own attempt to explain the Trinity in a relatable way during my ordination panel, I borrowed an image from my internship supervisor. Before you're ordained in the ELCA you have a lot of classes to take, papers to write, hoops to jump through, discerning to do, and many, many panels of people who want to ask you all sorts of questions. One of the final panels you sit with before ordination is a small group of theologians. During this theological approval panel I started explaining the Trinity as I would to a child. I said the Trinity was like an individual who was one person but had three modes of operating, say, a mother, grandmother, and wife. I was pretty proud of my answer, and thought I nailed that question. Well, in conversation with the theologians afterwards and in the report the team wrote I was told that basically I was a heretic. That's not exactly what you want to hear before being approved for ordination. Anyway, that panel forwarded their report to the final panel. Later I went before this final panel. Now, this was *the* panel to officially approve me for ordination or send me looking for another path after 5 years. They asked me to explain a bit more about the statement the theological panel wrote. I told them the story. Afterwards one of the pastors started laughing. This, again, was *not* the reaction I was expecting. He turned to everyone in the room and said, "I'm not sure how you'd begin explaining the Trinity to children without a little heresy." He said, "Once you've actually figured it out you should let the rest of the church know." Point taken - the Trinity it

¹ http://day1.org/1045-dancing_with_the_trinity

ridiculously hard to explain. Yet, instead of shrugging off the Trinity all together and moving on with the service, let's allow today's texts to illuminate our conversation.

Our first reading today comes from Proverbs. Just the fact that it comes from Proverbs makes me pause, since we'll only hear from Proverbs one other time this year. In this reading we find lady wisdom calling. Often times in the history of the church we've interpreted lady wisdom to be a personification of one of God's attributes.² If we take that interpretive lens, then first I want to lift up the feminine nature of God. When we get glimpses of the feminine in the Bible we need to grab on to them. Much like women in our contemporary culture, we find wisdom here almost needing to prove herself. It's as though she has to argue for her status and place. In verses 22 through 31 she's establishing her credentials, reminding us that she's been there *before* the beginning of creation. In our translation lady wisdom says she was "brought forth." Yet this phrase comes from a Hebrew word that has some deep richness that also means "whirl, dance, or writhe."³ This image of wisdom dancing or whirling into existence reminds me of the Eastern Church's emphasis on the Trinity as perichoresis. Perichoresis comes from the Greek root *peri* meaning "around", like perimeter or periscope, and *chorein* which has many meanings including "to make room for," "go forward," or "contain." So if we put it all together perichoresis can be translated as "dancing around." This is a powerful image of

² Klein, Ralph W. *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 3 Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16). "Trinity Sunday, Proverbs 8:1-4,22-31: Exegetical Perspective"* p27-29.

³ <http://biblehub.com/hebrew/2342.htm>

our God. We don't worship some grumpy God who reluctantly forgives sins and who only intercedes because it's "a part of the job." Rather, our God dances around this world.⁴

And using today's image from Romans, our God dances around pouring out and overflowing many gifts to all humankind.⁵ In Romans Paul reminds us that it's not that God is the divine cause of pain. It's not that we look *for* pain. It's not that we put ourselves in abusive situations, or that we look for sorrow and pain because that's what God requires of us. No, rather Paul argues here in Romans that painful things in life will happen without us seeking them out. When these painful things do happen on their own, Paul reminds us to remain faithful so that we might discover God's love even *in* the pain and suffering⁶

Far too many times as a chaplain I sat on the beds of patients who believed that this Roman's passage justified their partner's abuse because they could then prove their faithfulness to God. I've had marriage counseling sessions where this passage seemed to justify staying in a deeply flawed and awful marriage to prove faithfulness to God. Yet, my friends, Paul is not saying to force pain and suffering on yourself – no. Christ's example was to dance throughout life. Dance in pain, dance in joy, and dance in the unknown. Resurrection is about dancing. Dancing is about working with another in a relationship. Dancing is about communicating something deep. Dancing is about creating something

⁴ This paragraph pulls on some images and ideas from: Paschal, Jeff. *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 3 Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16)*. "Trinity Sunday, Proverbs 8:1-4,22-31: Homiletical Perspective" p27-29.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ This section dovetails on ideas from: Sheffield, Richard L.. *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 3 Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16)*. "Trinity Sunday, Romans 5:1-5: Homiletical Perspective" p27-29.

new. Dancing is about being gracious with mistakes. Dancing throughout everything that life throws our way is what being a Christian is all about.

In our reading from John today we see this dance, this relationality emphasized. We see the deep connection between God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. This reminder is key for all that will follow in the Christian Scriptures. You see, Jesus and his life and ministry are congruent with God's action in the world, and both of their acts and teachings are what the Holy Spirit will continue to enliven, and teach, and remind those disciples. So too these disciples will go to share this message empowered by the Holy Spirit to reflect this same essence in new ways and new contexts. Then the church and its believers will take this same message, the same nuggets of God, the same teachings of Christ, the same essence of the Holy Spirit, the same preaching of the disciples, and the church will make this same thing come alive in an ever-changing world. That is the key to this passage.

You see, even here and now in 2016 the church is changing. How the world looked in the 1960s isn't how it looks now, and the church must transition. What our own congregation looked like 20 years ago isn't what it is today. So too we enter into a transition time. However, what is key to remember is that the essence of the church and the essence of this congregation do not change. Jesus makes abundantly clear that the Holy Spirit will teach and remind us all of what Jesus has already said. Sure, the Holy Spirit is a little different - the way the Holy Spirit works will be using wind and tongues of fire and blinding light - but the essence of what the Spirit does is one with Jesus, who is one with the creator God, and all three are in a holy dance.

On this Holy Trinity Sunday, I pray that we live into this holy dance. Dancing is deeply relational. It requires us to see the other, feel the other, and respond to another. A dance communicates stories. If you've even been to a ballet you can see the drama of the characters, the plot, the conflict, and the resolution through dance. Ultimately dance brings us into something new and creative. In the days ahead, I pray that you recognize our God's dance among us. Join in the dance with our God, explore God's dance in all aspects of life, and remember that our God's dance is one of love. Amen.