

Trinity Sunday; the one Sunday of the church year when we celebrate a doctrine, the one Sunday when we celebrate a belief about who God is.

Trinity Sunday is a turning point in the church year. For roughly the past six months, we have been focusing on events in Jesus' life: his birth, his baptism, his crucifixion, his resurrection. For the next six months, we will focus on Jesus' teachings.

But today, our focus is on the Holy Trinity. Today our focus is on who God is and how we experience God in the persons we traditionally call Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

One slight problem, though. The actual word 'Trinity' appears nowhere in scripture.

Jesus never said, "The Father, the Spirit, and I make up the Trinity."

St. Paul never said, "Jesus, the Father, and the Holy Spirit are the three persons of the Trinity," or that "God is three in one and one in three."

None of the writers of the New Testament ever explicitly talk about or define the Trinity. Scripture doesn't mention the Trinity explicitly.

But... and this is an important but... BUT a Trinitarian understanding of God is implicit in scripture, especially in the New Testament. The belief in God as Trinity is undergirded by scripture.

Paul concludes 2 Corinthians by writing, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you."

In our Epistle today from Romans, Paul speaks of how the Spirit helps us to call God "Abba, Father," which shows that we are joint heirs with Christ, the Son. In this one passage Paul makes distinctions between Father, Son, and Spirit.

In our Gospel reading today from John, Jesus talks to Nicodemus about God and about the Spirit. Jesus also speaks about himself as God's Son.

This is the crux of the matter. This is the central reason that the Church had to formulate the doctrine of the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity is an attempt to make sense of the complexities of how God is revealed in the New Testament. Scripture describes God as Father, and Son, and Holy Spirit. The doctrine of the Trinity is the Christian church's attempt to explain the reality that scripture points to about the nature of God.

Now, it did take the Christian church more than 300 years of painful debates, heated discussions, and numerous council meetings to fairly precisely define what the Trinity is. The Nicene Creed which we recite every Sunday is the church's attempt to delineate God's simultaneous three-ness and one-ness.

But at heart, trying to explain the Trinity is trying to explain something that is ultimately incomprehensible. Whenever we try to explain the reality of God, our words fail us. Our images fail us. Our limited brains fail us. There is no way our human vocabularies and thought processes can capture the reality of God's own nature.

But that doesn't stop us from trying to offer analogies or explanations.

So oftentimes on Trinity Sunday, you'll hear a heretical sermon about the Holy Trinity. It's often heresy because whenever we finite human beings try to speak definitively about the nature of God, we can often get tangled up in our own errors.

And we often used flawed analogies for the Trinity based upon concepts familiar to us. Maybe you've heard a couple of these used in sermons before.

One famous, though erroneous analogy is that the Trinity is like water. A water molecule can exist in different forms: ice, liquid, steam. So God, this analogy states, can exist as Father, Son, and Spirit. This is actually the ancient heresy of Modalism. Modalism, at heart, has God functioning in one mode at a time.

The problem is God is not Father some of the time and Son some of the time and Spirit some of the time. God is God, all the time. The Father, Son, and Spirit are simultaneously God, all the time. So water as liquid, steam, and ice is a bad analogy.

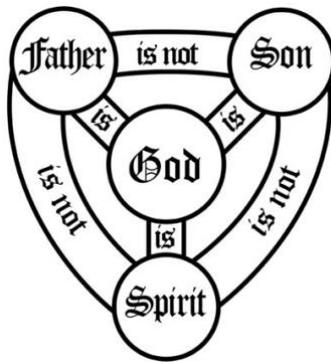
Or maybe you've heard about St. Patrick's shamrock. Yes, I'm Irish. Yes, I love St. Patrick. But thankfully St. Patrick probably did NOT invent this model of the Trinity that's attributed to him. I'm sure you've heard it. The Trinity is like a shamrock: three parts that make up one whole.

This is actually Tri-theism, having three separate gods, or three almost separate gods. The shamrock model makes the Father, Son, and Spirit almost three separate entities, joined by just a tiny bit at the center. The problem is that the Father is not 1/3 of the whole God, but is fully God. And ditto for the Son and Spirit. So the shamrock is a bad analogy.

And just about every analogy I've ever heard that tries to explain the Trinity runs into similar problems. One of the better ones is the quarks that make up protons and neutrons and other similar particles. The analogy is attractive because quarks come in sets of 3 and they are bound together in a web of energy. But even so, the 3-quark model has basically the same problem as the shamrock. Each quark is a third of a proton. But each part is not equal to the whole.

The fundamental problem here is that we're dealing with mystery and paradox. The Trinity is a paradox, it is a mystery, and any attempts to constrain it using human analogies will fall short.

Probably the best picture of the Trinity is a classic diagram that we printed on the front of the bulletin this morning.



This diagram captures the paradox. At the corners you see Father, Son, and Spirit. At the center is God. And there are connecting lines.

The Father is God. The Son is God. The Spirit is God.

But there are 3 other connecting lines that go around the perimeter. These say that the Son is not the Father. The Father is not the Spirit. The Spirit is not the Son. Each person of the Trinity is fully God. But they are distinct from each other. That's

the paradox. That's the mystery.

So let's shift gears. Let's turn and look at things from a different angle. Let's not try to explain the Trinity. Let's try to appreciate and celebrate the Trinity.

Because the best explanation of the Trinity is not water or shamrocks. Instead, it is about a dance.

The ancient theological term is perichoresis. It's a word that's been used to describe the Trinity for more than 1,600 years.

Perichoresis is a word that comes from ancient Greek theater. Peri- as in perimeter, the outer edge of a circle; -choresis as in choreography. It is a dance. A circle dance.

It's a wonderful image because a dance is fluid and moving, and yet the dancers are in relationship with one another.

In the same way the Father, Son, and Spirit are in a fluid relationship with each other, bound together by mutual love.

God loves. God loves his creation. God loves his creatures. Our Jewish and Muslim cousins would agree with these statements. God loves things he has made which are outside himself.

But Christians go a step further. God loves. Yes. But also, God IS love.

God loves things outside of himself. But God inside, God is also a perfect relationship of love within himself. Before anything is created, God exists in a perfect and self-sufficient relationship of love at his own core, within his very nature. In the divine dance between Father, Son, and Spirit, at the heart of God, is love. God is in relationship within himself even before anything else is created.

God loves creation externally. But internally, God is love as well.

God gives. But at heart, God is also an internal exchange of mutual gifts.

God at heart is a diversity, Father, Son, and Spirit. But God is also a unity—one God, one divine nature.

And in our 21st Century world, this is perhaps the most essential aspect of the Trinity for us to acknowledge and celebrate. God in his own core and in his own nature holds diversity and unity together in a mutual dance of love.

Our human answer to diversity is often to push back and demand uniformity. If you don't look like me or think like me or believe like me then I deem you as other and suspicious and maybe even dangerous.

But uniformity is not the way God creates the world. Nature has a bewildering and wonderful variety. For example, think of the variety of creatures in the animal kingdom: an ant, a snake, a platypus, a blue whale. These examples remind us that God creates with abandon and with a mind-boggling diversity.

And uniformity is not the way God is at heart. At heart, God is a diversity of Father, Son, and Spirit sharing one divine unity.

And though God is self-sufficient in his mutual love between Father, Son, and Spirit, God's love overflows from that divine dance to invite us into the dance as well.

God doesn't need us. God doesn't need creation. God doesn't create us because he's somehow lonely or in need of our worship.

Instead, God's own nature of loving and giving is so bountiful and fruitful and overflowing, that God creates us out of love. Like a river flooding its banks, God's being overflows flows out to us. And the Trinitarian God invites us to join the dance of mutual and perfect love within God's own self. We are invited to share relationship with the God who at heart is a relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit.

And that's a far more amazing and exciting image than any shamrock or ice cube could ever be.

God is love. Perfect love. And the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, wants to share that love with you.