

Trinity Sunday is always a dangerous day for a preacher. It's like standing on a tightrope with a long way to fall. Or driving down a mountain road with dangerous drop-offs on both sides.

How do you preach about something as complex as the mystery of the Trinity? Plus, any time you try to nail down in human terms the nature of the Trinity, you're likely to slide off the road into one ditch or another.

So I just want to deal with one main idea today. It doesn't explain the Trinity. But it highlights one aspect of the Trinity. And it tells us how we should live in light of the Trinity.

And that idea is community or relationship. At the core of who God is, God is a community or a relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit.

The great 5th century North African bishop, St. Augustine, offers one analogy. It doesn't define the Trinity. But it gives us an insight into a piece of the nature of the Trinity.

Augustine says that some aspects of the Trinity are analogous to a lover, and the beloved, and the love that flows back and forth between them.¹

That's a great image. Lover, beloved, and the love that exists between them.

Like anything we say about the Trinity, we don't want to push the image too hard or too far. Nevertheless, it reminds us that God is in relationship with himself. God is one, yet Father, Son, and Spirit exist in a dance of love with one another, exchanging love with one another.

At heart, God is a self-contained relationship or community, even in his oneness.

And a huge part of the good news of that Trinitarian nature of God is that we are invited to be part of that relationship, that community, that love. And if we are in relationship with God, by extension that puts us in relationship with everyone God is in relationship with.

In our privatized, individualistic culture, that's something that we often ignore.

And it's an even harder sell in our culture in an age of polarization. Our culture tells us, interact with those you agree with, ignore those who are different from you.

Our polarized culture tells us choose up sides. Only talk with like-minded people. Broadcasting is dying off. Now we have narrowcasting. Nowadays you can interact on the internet only with people who share your interests. You can only watch the news channel that agrees with your point of view and ignore all the others.

And yet, we are not just citizens of a country. We are also part of the Christian church. God calls all of us to be in relationship with him, and with our fellow Christians. And

¹ *De Trinitas*, Book 8

the church, especially a big-tent church like the Episcopal Church, has folks of all different varieties of political thoughts, opinions, ideologies, and parties.

So that means our fellow Christians might differ from us. We might disagree on some issues. Yet God calls us into communion with one another, and to come to the communion rail together as fellow Christians.

How do we live that way? How do we pull it off? How do we reach out across the divides that separate us?

I would contend that a deeply Trinitarian faith is what we need to hold us together.

A Trinitarian faith proclaims the truth that at heart, God is one. And yet God is also a community. At the core of his nature, there is a wonderful mutuality and interplay. At the core of God's very nature is loving relationship.

I know, this is paradoxical. Yet living with paradox and holding opposites in tension is an important part of the Christian life. And paradox certainly applies to God.

After all, a Trinitarian faith says that the Lord before whom even angels veil their faces, the God who is high and lifted up, that same God came to earth as a human being. Jesus was touchable, Jesus was observable with our senses. And yet, that same God also dwells with us in a different way. More intimately. Not in a body. But in us through the Holy Spirit.

So is God remote? Yes. Is God intimately present? Yes. Is God touchable? Yes. Is God untouchable? Yes. Is God singular? Yes. Is God plural? Yes. Is God one? Yes. Is God a community, a relationship? Yes.

So many tensions. So many paradoxes.

And yet, why should we be surprised? Because God's creation is also full of tensions and paradoxes. Those of you who are into science know that paradox is fundamental in creation. Think of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, or Schrödinger's cat. But even those of you who have no clue what I just said know something about the complexity of the universe.

You know about atoms. You know that atoms are made up of three kinds of smaller particles: protons, neutrons, and electrons. Three very different kinds of particles in the one atom. Protons and neutrons are relatively heavy. Electrons are thousands of times lighter. Electrons go whizzing around in orbits around the relatively stationary protons and neutrons. Electrons have negative charge. Protons have a positive charge. Neutrons are neutral.

Now you might be saying, "OK Jim, that's middle school science. So what?"

Here's the deal. These particles are very different from each other. And yet they join together to form an atom. Protons, neutrons, and electrons, through various forces, are held in tension with each other.

And there's something even more significant. When it comes to atoms, it's not just about the parts being in tension with each other. It's about HOW the parts stay in tension with each other, and yet function.

And the answer is this. Protons, neutrons, and electrons stay together because they are constantly sharing things with each other. They constantly exchange energy with each other. And they exchange energy by exchanging particles with each other, back and forth, all the time.

At the most fundamental levels of the universe, very different particles stay together because they constantly are passing things back and forth between them. They don't live in isolation. The tiny particles in an atom are tied together by an exchange of other even tinier particles. In physics, those particles have names like photons, and gluons, and gravitons.

But when it comes to the church, those particles have different names. Our patron saint, St. Paul speaks of such things that we share. He calls them, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit."²

What binds Christians together? Grace. Love. Fellowship.

And if we're going to be a Christian community, we have to embrace and exchange grace, love, and fellowship. Those are the little particles we have to pass back and forth with our fellow Christians. Those are the forces that will bind us together regardless of our disagreements.

Grace. We have to ask God to pour his grace upon others. We have to pray for those with whom we disagree. God may change their minds. God may change our minds. Or we may continue to agree to disagree. But bottom line, prayers for those with whom we disagree are vitally important.

Love. Jesus told us to love our enemies. If he calls us to such a high standard with our enemies, I have NO doubt he would also say, "Love those Christians with whom you disagree." We might not like everything others they do. But we have to look for tangible ways of showing our love for them, in spite of our disagreements.

Fellowship. When you spend time with someone, you often are able to see them as real people, not issues, not caricatures. If we get to know people, we just might find that the things we agree upon far outweigh the things that divide us. We might find that we often have similar values, even though we might reach different conclusions as to how those values should be expressed.

If you're going to be held together as a Christian community, you need God's grace, God's love, God's fellowship to be with you, and to be shared amongst you. You need to be exchanging these things with other members of the body, passing them back and forth across the fences between you. You've got to let these forces serve as bungee cords that tie you to each other even as they give you the flexibility to be on different sides of various issues.

² 2Cor 13:13

Of course, as Christians, there are things that we have to agree upon. There are things that are non-negotiables. We're going to proclaim a list of them in just a few minutes.

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty.
We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God.
We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life.

But outside of these essentials, there is room for disagreement, even over polarizing issues.

If you and I agree on the essentials, then we can remain in disagreement over nonessentials, as long as we maintain bonds of grace, love, and fellowship between us.

500 years ago, during the Reformation, the last great turbulent period of the church's history, one of the great reformers said the following:

"In essentials, unity. In nonessentials, diversity. In all things charity" (i.e. love).³

The Holy Spirit has given us all gifts for the common good.

Together we must use these gifts to proclaim our central faith in our triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And when it comes to polarizing issues that place us on different sides of the fence, we need to reach out to our brothers and sisters in Christ with whom we may disagree. And we need to share with them those things that God so freely shares with us.

At heart, God is a perfect relationship within himself. And he calls us to share in that relationship, with him, and with each other.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore. Amen.

³ Philip Melancthon (though erroneously attributed to MANY others)