

“Dancing With the Divine”

Pentecost 1, John 16:12-15; Romans 5:1-5

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I. THE TRINITY—TOPIC TO AVOID?

There’s another topic, it seems, that preachers avoid like the plague! I did not know this until I started really delving in, this week, to what is called Trinity Sunday.

The Trinity, kind of a basic concept in Christianity, but I guess the idea of God being one, yet three persons, is not nearly as “nailed down” as we might think! It’s really not a clearly-defined concept in the Bible, but bits of scripture were picked up here and there and put together as descriptors of God, until someone(s) in the 4th century decided it needed some serious focus.

But, even with intentional focus all those many years after the scriptures were written down, it’s never been totally agreed upon, though church fathers and mothers and scholars have been voting and debating, examining and declaring for centuries.

So, as I’ve mentioned, I’m *not* afraid to wade in where other preachers fear to tread. There *is* agreement on this: The trinity is a mystery! Just as understanding God in *all* God’s manifestations is far beyond our grasp, trying to get our heads around God as One but with three parts or expressions or images or.....

Perhaps that’s it! The problem starts when we try to get our *heads* around it. Or Her. Or Him. Perhaps we need to think more with our hearts. Today, we won’t try to figure out the Trinity. We will, instead, paint a bit of a mosaic. Look at some of the many ways folks have considered and are still exploring the concept of the Triune God, and see if we see an opening for ourselves to join in and experience even a little piece of the mystery.

II. THE TRINITY DESCRIBED

One theologian mused:

“After the fireworks of Pentecost, Trinity Sunday seems like a bit of a letdown. Functionally speaking, most mainline, liberal, and progressive Christians are Unitarian in spirit, if not theology. Although we recite the creeds from time to time, the doctrine of the Trinity is vague, confusing, and for the most part irrelevant in most congregants’ experience. Mainline and progressive Christians tend to focus on God as a whole, creator and parent of all things, and Jesus, the way-shower, immanent in our world.”

There is a story that St. Augustine (way back in the 4th century) was walking on the beach contemplating the mystery of the Trinity. Then he saw a boy in front of him who had dug a hole in the sand and was going out to the sea again and again and bringing some water to pour into the hole.

St. Augustine asked him, “What are you doing?” “I’m going to pour the entire ocean into this hole.” “That is impossible, the whole ocean will not fit in the hole you have made” said St. Augustine. The boy replied, “And you cannot fit the Trinity in your tiny little brain.” The story concludes by saying that the boy vanished because St. Augustine had been talking to an angel.

(From Volume 5 of *The Golden Legend* by Jacobus de Voragine)

There’s a story about an Asian gentleman to whom a well-meaning missionary was speaking about God the Father who created us, about God the Son who died and was raised up for us, and about the Holy Spirit of Love who appeared as a Dove over the head of Jesus when He was baptized.

After the Asian gentleman had listened politely to the explanation, he said: “*Honorable Father -- ah, very good. Honorable Son -- also very good. But Honorable Bird -- I do*

not understand at all.” So, I suppose we could also say:
“*Honorable Holy Trinity -- that we do not understand at all.*”

One preacher put it: “The most important truth about the Holy Trinity: namely, that to know God as Three and, at the same time to know God as One, has to do with responding to God’s invitation to be in relationship with Godself: and not simply about having information about God.”

III. DIFFERENT NAMES FOR TRINITY

Different names have been used and emphasized down through the ages for the parts of the Trinity. The most famous being: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Or Holy Ghost. (But in our day and Hollywood age, many agree that conjures up a different image that we’re trying to get at! And one Hollywood, satirized the third person of the Trinity and called him The Holy Spook! Once you have that line in your head, it’s hard to lose it!)

*St. Augustine used what we would now call psychological categories to explain the Trinity in terms of memory, understanding, and will.

*In our own time, we speak of the Trinity in a number of ways, perhaps speaking of the God who creates, who redeems, and who sanctifies.

Charles K. Robertson tells us that:

*A twelfth-century scholar, Richard of St. Vincent, spoke of God in terms of shared love, a community in which that love is expansive and generous. It is love that cannot be self contained. It overflows from Parent to Child to Spirit and back again. The love of God, the love that IS God is like a divine Dance, a dynamic and graceful and deeply intimate movement. In this movement, the God who is "I AM" is not alone, never alone, for the very essence of God is relationship.

This is far different from those mythological deities of old who were always fighting with one another, rivals and annoyances of

one another. No, what we see in the Trinity is a dance of Persons who are mutually affirming, mutually caring. For the very essence of God is relationship, community, unconditional love.

For an Orthodox Christian, the Trinity is not an abstract theological concept: it is a reality which is to be lived through. The Trinity is Someone to Whom we pray, but it is also Community, the Communion of three in one, the Family in Whose image we build up our own human community.

God for us, we call you Father.

God alongside us, we call you Jesus.

God within us, we call you Holy Spirit.

IV. PERICHORESIS

So, amidst all this mystery, and the different ideas and language used to attempt to describe the Three-expression God we follow, a beautiful descriptor has been re-discovered.

There’s a Greek word: Perichoresis. (perry-ko-RAY-sis) (I won’t quiz you on how to spell that, but I might ask you next week if you remember what it means!)

Perichoresis is the most beautiful and elegant picture of the Christian godhead that many Christians may be completely unaware of.

Danielle Shroyer tells of it for contemporary listeners:

Perichoresis. It’s made by a combination of two words: *Chora*, a noun which means “space” and the verb form, *chorein*, which means to make space, and *peri* which means “around”.

So perichoresis, roughly translated, means to make space around. More specifically, it refers to the way in which someone or something makes space around itself for others or something else.

God can be both in Godself and also in us, for example. In a more active sense, it is the idea of God moving in and through someone or something. It's like a swirling or a dance. It's definitely an active verb. (That's partly due to some confusion because the Greek word for dance is *choreuo*, so it's become kind of a play on words.)

But, most important for us is this: Perichoresis is used (and has been used for many an era—going back to the Cappadocian Fathers of the 4th century!) to describe theologically the divine dance of the three Persons of the Trinity. Father, Son and Holy Spirit make room for each other, move in and through one another, dance with one another, in such a way that creates a mutual indwelling while still maintaining space for each individually.

Perichoresis also prevents us from falling into the idea of a hierarchy within God, where God the Father is at the top, and Jesus is the middle, and the little Holy Spirit gets totally lost

The fourth-century Cappadocian Fathers tried to communicate this notion of life as mutual participation by calling the Trinitarian flow a “circle dance” (*perichoresis*) between the three. They were saying that whatever is going on in God is a flow that's like a dance; and God is not just the dancer, God is the dance itself!

This has resurfaced in recent years as a popular image for Trinity, because it makes sense! It's the metaphor that we can grasp, as it describes the energy and heart and intention of the Trinity.

V. DIVINE DANCE

A Divine Dance. Not a static thing. Also not a wooden, rigid thing—some theological concept that has to be nailed down—once and for all—and stay that way! It really *is* a mystery—something ever growing and our experience and understanding of it is also changing. That's why all those ways it's been understood and described over the centuries are “true.”

They are true because they resonate with us, with others, with how we've understood God at different times—specially here, how we've understood this *aspect* of God. This, Three-in-one and one-in-three characteristic of God.

VI. WE ARE INVITED TO JOIN!

Charles K. Robertson

It is even more remarkable then that God, who in this Dance needs no other, did choose to create and redeem a people--no, even more, chose to create and redeem you, me, each and every individual we encounter--so that we might join in this Dance. The invitations have been sent. There are to be no mere spectators on the dance floor. No outcasts, no outsiders. We are called by God to see ourselves as God sees each of us and thus discover ourselves to be, like the Persons of the Trinity, truly beloved.

As I look around, all too often I see people who desperately need to know what this is like, people who feel alone, cast out, not beloved. What would happen if we looked at all those around us with fresh eyes, seeing not rivals or annoyances or, perhaps worst of all, as invisibles...but rather God's Beloved ones, God's Dance partners?

Blest Community

O Most Holy Trinity
Undivided Unity,
teach us the gentle deference
of your dance of surrendered love
how with infinite tenderness
and utmost esteem
you so gently
adoringly
are present
to one another.

Teach us your perichoresis,
your grand circle dance,
where you eternally birth joy
from the womb of reverence.
Teach us your unending,
enfolding regard
for the pure holiness
you hold and behold.

You,
sweet breath and the lungs of creation,
eternally giving,
empty
and eternally receiving
are filled.

You release and bind,
but never push nor pull.
You hold accountable,
but never blame.

You incline yourselves to one another
as a grove of green willows
bending in the breeze
bowing to each other's grace
known and cherished
on the broad plain of mutuality.

Deepen our trust, O Blest Community,
that we may enter such intimacy.

— written by Loretta F. Ross, and posted on **The Praying Life**.
<http://theprayinglife.com/>