

St. Martin-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

Keller, Texas

Sermon for May 30, 2021~ Trinity Sunday

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Trinity Sunday is the only major feast day that is based on a doctrine rather than an event. The doctrine of the Trinity itself cannot be found explicitly in scripture. Yet, it is scriptural. It is the result of the Church's first 250 years of reflecting on scripture and on its experience of the self-revelation of God over us, of God with us, and of God in us. Once a year it is beneficial for us to think deeply about the threefold nature of our God, whom the Bible reveals to us as the Holy Trinity.

God is one: *shema yisrael, adoni eloheynu, adoni* – “Hear O’ Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.” This ancient confession of faith from the Book of Deuteronomy (6:4-9) is the foundation of all that we say about God – God is one in essence, unity, being, power, holiness, and purpose. The Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit are three expressions of the one reality we call God – the God Isaiah experienced in the Jerusalem Temple.

The Bible reveals God as coming to us in three distinct ways, three distinct co-equals – over, with, and in us – and yet the same God. God is over us as our source, our creator, our protector, the Sovereign One above and beyond who governs justly throughout all creation, the Divine Parent Jesus called “Father,” beginning and preserving all things. But this One God is also a loving, gracious, and merciful Savior who has revealed himself as a Son, determined to overcome the gulf between the holy and the profane, reconciling, liberating, saving, redeeming us so that we might live in communion with God. And this God who creates, governs and preserves, reveals, loves and redeems, also renews, transforms, empowers, and sustains everything within creation and remains eternally present to us. All of this is the work of the One God, indivisible in being, purpose and work; God is one.

Yet this one God is revealed in three different ways: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Western Church has called these ways “persons,” not to differentiate them as individual gods, but to identify them as the three different ways God has revealed God's self to us, as well as the three different ways the three are related to one another within the unity of God's being: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Like Nicodemus, we are invited into the Kingdom, the life, of this one God. That is, we are invited into the abundant, eternal life of God. And we, like Nicodemus, might wonder, “Where do we start?”

Nicodemus was a religious leader; but there is sometimes a difference between being religious, even being a religious leader, and actually knowing God. Nicodemus had a high profile public commitment to God on the outside; but he wanted, as many of us do, something more, something deeper, a relationship with God on the inside. Nicodemus wanted to journey into the mysterious realm that is God. So Nicodemus comes to Jesus secretly, under the cover of darkness, to say, “You come from God. Everyone can see that. I want to know God, too; I want to really know God. I feel like I want God in my life. But how do I begin?” In other words, “Where do I start?”

So-called evangelical Christianity likes to say we start by inviting Jesus to enter our hearts. In this Church, we say that the beginning is when we enter the life of the Triune God. That is declared when we are Baptized in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That’s what the encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus was about that night.

What Jesus told Nicodemus was, “Nicodemus, you don't need God in your life.... You don't need God to come into your life. That's backwards. You need to come into in *God's life*. God offers us God's own life as a gift and invites us to enter it. *You* need to be *in* the life of God. In fact, Nicodemus, you need to be born all over again, this time born into God's life.”

“I don't know how to do that,” said Nicodemus. “I don't know how to be born all over again into the life of God. Where do I start?”

And Jesus said, “I know you don't know. But, Nicodemus, the life of God is not far away from you. The life of God has come near to you. Indeed, the life of God is sitting here with you, speaking to you right now.” The love binding together Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the passionate love flowing in the divine life, in the relationships of the Trinity, has been poured out into the world in Jesus. God so loved the world that God has given God's only Son – given a Son not to point a divine finger and condemn the world but to save it – given a Son as a way into the fullness of the life of God.

In other words, Jesus Christ is the starting point of the journey into the life of God. This is why people are baptized not just in the Name of Jesus but in the name of the Trinity. To be baptized is not just a ceremony but a rebirth into a new way of life, into God's own life. It is something that God does for us because we can't do it for ourselves. To be a follower of Jesus is to be drawn into a communion with the fullness of God's life and the life of God's people.

The Rev. John Buchanan, following retirement after 48 years as a Presbyterian pastor, wrote an article reflecting upon his ministry.¹ He recalled baptizing a two-year-old boy. After the child had been baptized with water, John Buchanan, following the rubrics of the Presbyterian prayer book, put his hand on the little boy's head and addressed him in Trinitarian language similar to that in our prayer book, saying, “You are a child of God, sealed by the Spirit in your baptism, and you belong to Jesus Christ forever.” Unexpectedly, the little boy looked up and responded, “Uh-oh.”

It was an amusing moment, and people in the congregation smiled, of course, but “it was an appropriate response,” wrote Pastor Buchanan, “... a stunning theological affirmation” from the mouth of a child. And indeed it was. That “uh-oh” was a recognition that everything had changed, that this boy would never be the same. He did not belong any more just to his biological family; he had now been born all over again, this time into God's Trinitarian family. Now he would be called to live out in the world the kind of love and self-giving that goes on among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He was being called in his baptism to live a different way in the world, God's way, a way that is sometimes met with rejection and scorn. No wonder he said, “Uh oh.” Life would never be the same.

Andrei Rublev is considered one of the greatest medieval Russian painters of icons and frescoes. One of his most famous icons is that of the Trinity, in which the three persons of the Trinity are portrayed as angels on three sides of a shared table. On the fourth side of the table, there appears to be painted a rectangular hole that has puzzled art historians for centuries. This icon graces the cover of Fr. Richard Rohr's book *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation*. In the book, Fr. Rohr says that contemporary art historians believe that the mysterious image is what remains of the glue that once held a mirror in place on the front side of the table in the original icon, suggesting that the observer was invited to be the fourth person at the table. The table is not reserved exclusively for the Three nor is the divine circle closed; we're all invited in. All creation is invited into the life of God.

And that is what the Trinity is all about. We are all invited to enter the life of God. To belong to God is to belong to the life of God, to the community of one God in three persons, and to be called to live our whole lives in the same manner that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit relate to each other. God loved the world so much that God gave his only Son Jesus the Christ who opens his arms wide to welcome us into the very life of God. That's where the journey into the Kingdom – the abundant, eternal life of God – begins.

¹ John Buchanan, "Beginnings and Endings," *The Christian Century*, Jan 25, 2012.

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