

A Community of Unity and Love – Georgann Kurtz-Shaw

Genesis 1:1-2:4a; Psalm 8; 2 Corinthians 13:11-13; Matthew 28:16-20

Today is Trinity Sunday. Following many weeks focusing on the life and ministry of Jesus, today Trinity Sunday begins us on a long period of Sundays focused on Christian growth and discipleship. Trinity Sunday is different than Christmas, different than Easter, than Ascension Sunday, and even different than Pentecost that we just celebrated last week. Trinity Sunday is the only Sunday in the church calendar dedicated to a doctrine rather than an event. That should tell us something about the nature of the doctrine of the Trinity. It deserves a Sunday because the church doesn't consider it trivial philosophical speculation about the nature of God. The church affirms the doctrine of the Trinity as unique and essential to the Christian faith—so essential that several hundred years ago the church set aside this Sunday each year specifically devoted to its teaching.

But one Sunday a year isn't enough to capture and convey in comprehensible terms the beauty and complexity of the Trinity. That's why we have centuries of scholarship, creeds, paintings, literature, Sunday School lessons, comics, and analogies using things like eggs, apples, and trees to explain it. In more recent history we've added websites, infographics, and YouTube videos (many of those also containing infographics) to help us explain the Trinity. (For one example of this, see "wikiHow to Explain the Trinity: 4 Steps with Pictures.")

Later in the service we're going to switch from our typical practice of reciting the Apostles' Creed to reading the fourth century Nicene Creed together. Through it we will collectively affirm the theological position that the three parts of the Trinity are equal and eternal. Some churches read what's popularly called the Athanasian Creed on Trinity Sunday because of its strong affirmation of the Triune nature of God. While scholars don't believe Athanasius actually authored this creed, it still frequently carries his name because St. Athanasius, Archbishop of Alexandria, fought fiercely for Trinitarian orthodoxy during the fourth century theological battle over the nature of Christ that resulted in the Nicene Creed. I am quite pleased that Pastor Judy chose the leaner, more elegant Nicene Creed rather than the later Athanasian Creed for us to read together this morning. Besides being long and bulky, the Athanasian Creed (that is still included in the Book of Common Prayer) works hard to explain the Trinity, but it does that in fairly complex and convoluted ways, at least to 21st century ears. Listen to these lines from the first third of the Athanasian Creed:

“We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance.

For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost is all one, the Glory equal, the Majesty co-eternal.

Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Ghost.

The Father uncreate[d], the Son uncreate[d], and the Holy Ghost uncreate[d].

The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible.

The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Ghost eternal.

And yet they are not three eternal but one eternal.
 As also there are not three incomprehensibles, nor three uncreated, but one uncreated, and one incomprehensible.
 So likewise the Father is Almighty, the Son Almighty, and the Holy Ghost Almighty.
 And yet they are not three Almighty, but one Almighty.
 So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God;
 And yet they are not three Gods, but one God.” (BCP, 864-5)

And so it goes. Dr. Seuss must have been a disciple of Athanasius. That’s only thirteen of the Creed’s 44 lines. By the halfway point of this Creed, I lose hope in ever understanding the Trinity and believe that the whole world is “uncreated” and “incomprehensible” and that the Athanasian Creed is “eternal.” Thank you, Judy, for sparing us that Creed and letting us continue to hope that we can better understand the Trinity.

In his book *Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying with Icons*, Henri Nouwen describes how at a particularly low point in his life he gained a deeper understanding of the Trinity by praying and meditating on an icon depicting it. Over the course of weeks, through this icon Nouwen came to view the Trinity as a “house of perfect love” within which “the mystery of God is revealed to us” (23). C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* devotes a chapter to what he calls “the three-personal God” (ch. 24). In it he explains how a person experiences the Trinity in prayer. According to Lewis, “God is the thing to which he is praying, the goal he is trying to reach. God is also the thing inside him which is pushing him on—the motive power. God is also the road or bridge along which he is being pushed to that goal.” While these are somewhat helpful analogies, even Nouwen and Lewis fall short in transforming the complexity of the Trinity into a wholly complete representation of God.

We try to explain the Trinity in Godly Play with our children here at St. Paul’s as well. I think the “Holy Trinity” story is the most challenging story we tell the children. I’ve only attempted it once, both because it’s typically after we end for the year and also because it’s so long, complex, and abstract. It’s an overwhelming story for both the storyteller and the children. In it the storyteller recites three full stories that the children have heard on earlier Sundays—the stories of Creation, the Faces of Easter, and Paul’s Discoveries which introduces the Holy Spirit. These are all long stories that get a Sunday or multiple Sundays earlier in the year. As each new story is added on Trinity Sunday, the children are supposed to try to match the parts with the previous stories to make connections. Then after they have finished doing that with the third story and everyone agrees that we have a huge mess on the rug in front of us, the storyteller takes out the three white circles from the Holy Baptism lesson and lays them over the three other stories, overlapping the circles with one another. As each circle is laid down over its story, the storyteller says, “When we baptize someone, we baptize him or her ‘in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.’ Now the stories are all connected by the circles, and yet each one is still there by itself. This is a strange kind of three-in-one thinking.” At the end of last year when I first tried this story with the children, we struggled to stay focused through all three stories and to make connections between them, but I applaud Jerome Berryman, the Godly Play guru, for attempting to give our children words and ways to think about the Trinity.

But even with more comprehensible creeds, centuries of scholarship and commentaries, not to mention the internet at our disposal, who among us would claim that she fully comprehends the doctrine of the Trinity? Certainly not me. In today's Gospel lesson, Matthew tells us that we baptize in the name (that's singular—one name) of the threefold God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but these three persons are not three gods. They are One—the one, true, and living God. This baffles my mind, as it should. When we talk about the Trinity, we are discussing the very essence of an infinite God. It makes sense that it doesn't make sense. If we could grasp the essence of the infinite God with our finite human minds, then wouldn't our minds be at least equal to or greater than God? The very fact that this doctrine baffles me is one reason why I believe in its truth. I don't think I should be able to explain an infinite God in human terms. I'm just not wise enough. None of us are. An infinite God should be beyond human comprehension and explanation. An infinite God is mystery.

The Trinity is a uniquely Christian doctrine. Our world has three great monotheistic religions—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. All of these religions espouse belief in one God. The Jews worship Yahweh. The Muslims worship Allah. And we Christians worship God. But we worship one God who is Parent, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Parent is God. The Son is God. The Holy Spirit is God. In the words of the Nicene Creed, we as Christians confess faith in “one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth” and “in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father.” Furthermore, in the Nicene words, we confess faith “in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified.” Our Muslim neighbors and Jewish friends do not hold this belief. The doctrine of the Trinity is a uniquely Christian doctrine.

But more than this, it is an essential doctrine for who we are as Christians. If it were a unique but not an essential doctrine, then we might consider dropping it in favor of promoting deeper inter-religious relationships. But the doctrine of the Trinity is so essential to our faith that if we were to take it away, we would not only contradict the Bible, but we would destroy our faith. The Bible doesn't specifically mention the doctrine of the Trinity—we have the church to thank for that—but the Bible does affirm the Trinity by naming both Jesus and the Holy Spirit as God and as coequals with God. Our scripture lessons chosen for today confirm the individuality of the Three Persons of God as well as their “Tri-unity.” The Genesis account and Psalm 8 focus on the majesty and power of God. Even before the Creator God brings form and structure into the *formless void* and light into the darkness, the Triune God is there. The text tells us that before creation began, *a wind from God swept over the face of the waters*. In our Gospel lesson, Jesus claims, *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me* (Matt. 28:18). Even though the disciples have been with Jesus and have witnessed his death and resurrection, these words are shocking to them: *they worshiped him; but some doubted* (vs. 17). The Gospel of John begins with words that echo the creation account and also affirm Jesus as God: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth* (John 1:1-2,14).

The Bible also treats the Holy Spirit as coequal with God. In both our epistle reading and our Gospel lesson for today, the Holy Spirit ranks right alongside God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son. In his parting words to the Corinthians, Paul invokes all three as he bids the Corinthians *the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit* (vs. 13). Jesus' Great Commission to the disciples in our Gospel lesson at the end of Matthew also includes a balanced view of the Trinity when Jesus commands them to baptize *in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit* (vs. 20). In another New Testament passage that we don't have in front of us today, Peter tells Ananias and Sapphira that because they are guilty of lying to God they are also guilty of lying to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3-4).

Scripture affirms equality and balance and oneness between the three persons of God. But even if we say, as I have said, that this doctrine, this mystery, is both unique and essential for the Christian faith, we still need to ask ourselves, "What difference does it make in our daily living?" I would argue that it makes a great deal of difference in the way we live. Practically speaking, we tend to become like what we worship.

I don't know if you're similar to me in this way or not, but usually the things I most don't want to do are the things I most need to do. I am in a book group that Ann Zahniser, Sr. organizes each month. I enjoy the book group—that's not what I don't want to do—but a few months ago, the chosen reading was *The Shack* by William Paul Young, a book I had successfully avoided reading for a decade. As you probably know, *The Shack* has been incredibly successful. It is one of the few self-published books to make bestseller lists, including the top spot on the *New York Times* paperback list for almost two years. It has been translated into multiple languages, and most recently it came out as a mainstream movie. Despite an abysmal 19% positive critic rating on Rotten Tomatoes, audiences who have seen the movie have liked it, 81% of them in fact, and it has grossed just under \$93 million worldwide (Box Office Mojo). I haven't seen the movie, so I can't tell you if I agree with the critics or the audiences, but I will tell you that for a variety of reasons I didn't want to read the book. I had successfully avoided it for a decade while good friends sang its praises and many on the GC campus embraced it. So when I learned that it had been chosen for our book group reading a few months ago, I decided I needed to put aside my prejudices and read *The Shack* as objectively as I possibly could.

If you don't know the plot line, it's about a man named Mack who encounters a physical incarnation of the Trinity while he's trying to live with the pain of his young daughter's kidnapping and brutal murder. I can't tell you that *The Shack* changed my life or that I liked it, but I did find value in it. Its author, William Paul Young, takes the idea of the Trinity, and stretches, albeit heavy-handedly, our Western conceptions of who God is. Young creates a Trinity representative of Nouwen's "house of perfect love." Listen to this passage from Mack's earliest encounter with *The Shack's* three persons of the Trinity: "Thoughts tumbled over each other as Mack struggled to figure out what to do. Was one of these people God? ... Since there were three of them, maybe this was a Trinity sort of thing. But two women and a man and none of them white? Then again, why had he naturally assumed that God would be white? He knew his mind was rambling, so he focused on the one question he most wanted answered. 'Then,' Mack struggled to ask, 'which one of you is God?' 'I am,' said all three in unison. Mack looked from one to the next, and even though he couldn't begin to grasp what he was seeing and

hearing, he somehow believed them.” (*The Shack* 87)

William Paul Young certainly hasn’t crafted a masterful piece of literature, but perhaps he has come closer than many to capturing the beauty of community represented in the Trinity. Young’s Trinity includes an African-American female God, a Middle Eastern Jesus, and a Holy Ghost who is an Asian female—not what those of you my age saw on those flannel graphs when you were growing up in Sunday School.

What difference does encountering this Trinity make in Mack’s life? As he spends more and more time with them and as he watches them commune with and love one another, Mack becomes more and more like them. He becomes like what he is worshipping. He becomes more loving, more understanding. Mack is shaped by being with the Trinity.

As Christians, we worship a God who is a unified community. We worship a God who is three Persons—Parent, Son, and Holy Spirit—all living in loving harmony. Like Mack, we don’t have physical evidence for the reality of this mystery, but we “somehow believe” in its veracity, and as we worship the Triune God we become like the Triune God. We become a community of unity and love. We become the Church—the people of God—people who love one another and the world. In our epistle reading from 2 Corinthians, we see a clear connection between the triune nature of God and the loving nature of God’s church. First, Paul reminds the Corinthians to live a life of love: *Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell . . . agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss.* Next he gives them a Trinitarian benediction: *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.*

We worship one God and this God is the gracious Christ, the loving Parent, and the friendly Spirit. Because we worship this Triune God, we should be gracious, loving, and friendly to all. As Paul tells the troublesome Corinthians, we should *agree with one another*, we should *live in peace*, and we should *greet one another* with *holy* affection. As we do those things, we become like the God we worship in the Trinity. That’s what happens to us when we worship the God who is Parent, Son, and Holy Spirit. That’s what happens to us when we worship the God who is a united community. We become a community of unity and love. We become the Church—the people of God—a people who love one another and love the world. Thanks be to God for Trinity Sunday when we are reminded that the mystery of the Trinity is both unique and essential to our faith.

Bibliography

“The Athanasian Creed.” *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*.

<https://www.ccel.org/creeds/athanasian.creed.html>

Box Office Mojo. *The Shack*. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=theshack.htm>

Lewis, C.S. *Mere Christianity*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001.

Nouwen, Henri J. M. *Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying with Icons*. Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1987.

Rotten Tomatoes. *The Shack*. https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_shack
Sproul, R.C. "The Athanasian Creed." *Ligonier Ministries*.
<http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/athanasian-creed/>