

Trinity Sunday C 2019 Sermon

John 16:12-15

Jesus said to the disciples, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you."

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity was not invented out of thin air by some theologians in the early Church who were speculating on the nature of God. *Nobody*, by logical reasoning, would **ever** come up with the idea of one equaling three, and three equaling one; it's a logical absurdity! Rather, the doctrine of the Trinity arose as an attempt, however inadequate and flawed, to put into words how the early Christians *experienced* God and the world God created. And how *did* they experience God and God's world? As being, at the same time, diverse AND one.

Now, Christians down through the centuries have come up with clever metaphors and similes to try to "explain" the doctrine of the Trinity. St. Patrick supposedly used a Shamrock to show how three could be one. But you don't have to go too far beneath the surface of *that* visual image before you see that it doesn't really help very much. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are **persons** in relationship, not plant leaves *physically* joined at a stem. The question we *should* be asking, then, is: How are three **persons** related in such a way as to be one? If we are looking for images to describe the Trinity, therefore, we should be looking for examples of individual persons in our world who are related so lovingly and compassionately to each other that they can be said to be one in spirit, love, and mutuality. **Then** we could point at those *persons* and say, "See! The way those uniquely different persons relate to each other – *that's* like the Holy Trinity!" That would be a far more helpful image for the Trinity than the three leaves of one Shamrock.

So, if I were to try to state in words my *own* understanding of the meaning of the Holy Trinity, I would say this: At the heart of the Godhead is a diversity of persons so lovingly related to each other in mutuality that they are one.

The doctrine of the Trinity begins by stating that there are a diversity of persons in the Godhead. My friends, we only have to look around in our world to see that God *loves* diversity! Scientists in 2011 estimated that there are about 8.7 million species of living things on earth. 8.7 million distinct species. Furthermore, the study estimated that a staggering 86% of all species on land and 91% of those in the seas have yet to be discovered, described and catalogued! ¹

Even within our own, **one** species, *Homo sapiens*, we see an amazing diversity of skin color, hair color, eye color, height, weight, the sizes and shapes of our noses, ears, mouths, chins, heads, feet; we each have unique fingerprints and patterns of blood vessels in our retinas which can distinguish us from every other person. And then there are differences in language, culture, religion – and on and on.

In the first chapter of the Bible, in the story of Creation, God says, “Let **us** make humankind in **our** image, according to **our** likeness...” (Gen. 1:26) God speaks of God’s own self in the plural – which only makes sense, since humankind, created in God’s image, is so amazingly diverse! And yet, at the same time, the most important prayer in the Jewish Bible (*our* Old Testament) is the *Shema*, which begins, “Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is **one**.” (Deut. 6:4) God are One! And we human beings are created in the image and likeness of **that** God: we are diverse in race and religion and nationality and language and color and size and shape, yet created to be unified with each other in that same kind of binding love shared among the persons of the Trinity; a mutual interdependence which we see reflected in Jesus’ words in today’s Gospel. “The Spirit will not speak on his own...” Jesus says; “he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine.” The Son has received everything from the Father, and the Spirit receives everything from the Son and gives it to us.

We find this recurring theme of mutuality and interdependence among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit throughout the long Farewell Address of Jesus which we have been hearing the past several Sundays. In *last* Sunday’s Gospel, Jesus said, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father... I am in the Father and the Father is in me...” (John 14:9-10) There is a mutual indwelling between Father and Son – which brings to mind an image of Russian nesting dolls: The Son is in the Father like a smaller doll nests inside the larger doll; but then they are reversed, and the Father is in the Son. And in last week’s Gospel, we heard that WE also – you and I! – become one of the nesting dolls; for Jesus said, “You know [the Holy Spirit], because he abides with you, and he will be **in** you.” (John 14:17) The Spirit lives *with* us and *in* us, just as the Father lives in the Son and the Son in the Father.

So why do we, who share in the mutual indwelling of the Holy Trinity, why do we think and act as though we are **not** one with other human beings who are *equally* created in the image and likeness of God? Why do we think and act as though we are *in*dependent, rather than *inter*dependent, like the Persons of the Trinity in whose image and likeness we are created? Do we not remember Jesus’ prayer for us on the night before he was crucified? It was in our Gospel reading 2 Sundays ago: “I ask not only on behalf of [my disciples],” Jesus prayed, “but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word [which is you and I], that they may all be **one**. As you, Father, are in me and I am **in** you, may they also be **in** us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be **one**, as we are **one**, I **in** them and you **in** me, that they may become completely **one**...” (John 17:20-23)

The repetition of the words “in” and “one” leaves no room for doubt: Jesus’ ardent prayer the night before he died was that we humans be one, just as Jesus and the Father are one.

And yet...

And yet, when we open a newspaper or watch the TV news, what we find is almost the **opposite** of this *oneness* which Jesus prays for us; a divisiveness and polarization which is the **opposite** of the mutual indwelling, interdependence, and unity-in-diversity found within the Holy Trinity, in whose image and likeness we were created.

Yes, my friends, there **are** very difficult matters which must be faced in our world today – matters of immigration, poverty, relations between nations, threats of terrorism and cyberterrorism, global warming, our indiscriminate use of plastics polluting our oceans and killing animals, the heart-wrenching human decisions surrounding abortion, rising diseases caused by a fear of immunization or overuse of antibiotics, persecution of those of different races, socio-economic class, nationalities, or sexual orientation – you know the list as well as I. The question is: How do we deal with these matters? By separating ourselves into various tribes and factions and trying to grab as much as possible for our *own* group? No. If we are truly followers of Jesus, truly Christians, we must struggle with these matters as human beings created in the image and likeness of a Trinitarian God who is both diverse and one, the unity being created by mutual love and interdependence among persons.

I’ve been listening to a book by Pulitzer Prize-winning author and presidential historian Jon Meacham, titled, *The Soul of America: The Battle for Our Better Angels*. The subtitle derives from Abraham Lincoln’s First Inaugural Address, which was primarily addressed to the people of the South, where seven states had already seceded from the Union. President Lincoln desperately wanted to avoid a civil war, and his address was written in a spirit of reconciliation. He said, “We are not enemies, but friends. We *must* not be enemies. Though passion may have *strained*, it must not *break*, our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory... will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched... by the better angels of our nature.”

President Lincoln could have been speaking to our own situation in our nation today, where lines have been drawn between friends and enemies, and “passions have strained” – in some places, even broken – our bonds of affection. Oh, the issues are different between our time and Lincoln’s; but the human dynamics are much the same.

My friends, we need to hear again President Lincoln’s words, today. For his is a Trinitarian message about unity amidst diversity, a unity derived from bonds of affection, divine love, from whence come the better angels of our nature. And in

those areas of our common life today where passions have strained – and even broken – our bonds of affection, we have begun to see our fellow Americans as enemies, we need desperately to call on the better angels of our nature, and work for healing and reconciliation; which is what President Lincoln did *following* that tragic Civil War in which over a million Americans died – more American deaths than in all other U.S. wars combined. In his **Second** Inaugural Address, President Lincoln pleaded once again for unity amidst our differences, saying, “With malice toward none, with charity for all..., let us strive... to bind up the nation's wounds... to do all which may achieve... a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

It was, and is today, an ardent plea to live a Trinitarian life: for at the heart of the Godhead is a diversity of persons so lovingly related to each other in mutuality that they are one. And that’s what Jesus fervently prayed for us, on the night before he was crucified: that we all be one, as he and the Father [and the Holy Spirit] are one.

AMEN

1 <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2011/08/110823180459.htm>