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First Christian Church
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“God In Three Persons...”

John 15:26-27, 16:7-14 When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. 27 You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.”⁷ Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. 8 And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: 9 about sin, because they do not believe in me; 10 about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; 11 about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned. 12 “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. 13 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. 14 He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

“God in three persons, blessed Trinity.” The congregation I spent my earliest years in was very “high church,” and we tended to only sing the more “majestic,” and “stately,” if you will, hymns. The church’s architecture was also serious, sober, soaring, and when on Sunday morning 1000 people would gather in it for worship it was majestic indeed. But as “high church” as we were, there was one hymn we never sang the words to as they had written by its author, the hymn “Holy, Holy, Holy.” The hymn’s author had originally written *“God in three persons, blessed Trinity”* but the Disciples’ hymnal from **that** era had changed those words to *“God over all and blest eternally.”*¹ “Trinity” just wasn’t a word the Disciples ever tended to use.. And, I have to say, I never recall a sermon on the doctrine of the Trinity. In fact, for those who lived in Ft. Worth, when you heard the words “the Trinity” you assumed it meant the river by that name that ran through the city and from whose banks you could spend a lazy evening fishing for catfish. In fact, in my childhood church, the doctrine of the Trinity simply never came up in any way that I ever recall – except as something to have a little gentle fun

¹By the way, this example shows that the changing of words to hymns has been going on forever, and is not just something that has happened in the last few years. Folks have always been changing the words to hymns because of certain theological beliefs!

with since it seemed on the face of it so obviously preposterous that one God could be three “persons.” It appeared to us matter-of-fact Disciples that such a notion was unnecessarily complicated and even a silly sort of hang-over from the early church.

And yet that’s really presumptuous, though, isn’t it? For while dismissing those things that you don’t understand is hardly a trait limited to the Disciples, it is not a trait that helps us truly understand our faith. So today I want to talk a bit about this whole notion of “the Trinity.” And there are good reasons to. In the worldwide church’s life, this is the only Sunday of the whole liturgical year that is named after a doctrine. Every other special Sunday – Christmas, Easter, Pentecost – is named after an **event**. And we do ourselves a disservice if we simply dismiss a topic that has been struggled over in the Church for centuries. In fact, in the first few centuries of the Church’s life there was no issue that was fought over more than this. To our horror and puzzlement, thousands were actually killed by one theological side or the other battling over their understandings of this notion. Those who found themselves on the losing side of discussions about it found themselves labeled and persecuted as heretics. Now, we find it hard to imagine such passion over this, but rather than dismissing such contention as somehow silly, we need to realize that there was something important at stake here. For, after all, what we believe about God, about ultimate reality, about how Christ works in our lives makes a huge difference. For make no mistake: our beliefs can make our lives better or worse, more beautiful or more ugly. So, with that in mind, this morning, I want to say a few things about why this idea of the Trinity is actually an important one for your faith and mine.

“God in three persons, blessed Trinity.” The first Sunday after Pentecost has long been named by the wider church as Trinity Sunday because at Pentecost the story of God’s action is now complete with the coming of the Holy Spirit to those first followers of Christ. God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit are therefore the three “persons”

which comprise “the Trinity.” But before we go much further, we need to realize that this is one of those places where we can get tripped up by language. So indulge me here a little language lesson; I think it will prove helpful. The arguments in the first few centuries of the church’s life about the nature of God and the relationship between God, Jesus, and Spirit, were not conducted in English. Now, that seems an obvious point, but it’s an important one. It means that the English word “person” is actually a third-hand translation from the original language used. But due to the oddities of translation, the original word first got translated into Latin as *personae*, and then into English as “*person*.” But the essential thing to keep in mind here is that when the earliest Christians were talking about the Trinity, what they were really discussing and asking about was this: how does God work? What is God like? What, exactly, is Jesus’ relationship to God? If we keep these simple questions in mind, then we are apt to get less lost as we navigate these muddy waters.

And the answers, by the way, are not obvious. How *are* God and Christ related, for example? Even the gospel accounts differ here. Mark’s story of Jesus can be read as saying that Jesus only became the Son of God when he was baptized and accepted his mission from God. The Gospel of John, though, says that Christ existed with God from all eternity; “*in the beginning was the Word and the Word was God and the Word was with God.*” But Luke’s gospel suggests that Jesus as the Son of God happened at his birth in Bethlehem. Now, it would be terribly easy to find ourselves in very muddy theological waters here, but one of the things that will help us in our journey is to always remember something absolutely crucial about the nature of the language that you and I use to try to talk about God, and that is this: *all* language, when applied to God, is metaphorical; none of it is literal. So, for example, when we call God “our Father,” are we thereby asserting that God is literally male? No, of course not. When we use words like father, mother, guide, friend, and so on we are not making *literal* claims in the same

way I would be when I say that I am my daughters' father. No, we are applying language metaphorically and saying "God is *like* a father in the following ways" or "God is *like* a companion" is this or that regard or "God is *like* a mother in this way or that way."

It is the very same with this notion of the Trinity. To see this, let's return to that language lesson and to the language in which those who wrote and preached in the early Church. Which was, of course, Latin. And in Latin, the word "personae" just didn't mean what the word "person" means for us. When you go to a play, how does the program often list the cast? Under this heading: *Dramatis Personae*. And what that "Dramatis Personae" means is the **roles** that certain folks are playing in the production, right. That's what we should understand by this word "person" in this context, and that is exactly what the Trinity finally is too: a succinct description of the **roles** that God plays. And so what are those roles that the three "persons" of the Trinity play?

Well, first, the Trinity reminds us that God is **transcendent**. God is beyond us. God is utterly perfect. God is infinitely more than we are. God is not limited by the things that limit us. God, unlike us, is *perfectly* patient, *perfectly* loving, *perfectly* perfect. Which is what the word *transcendent* means: God transcends us, is beyond us. And that is a good thing. For without a transcendent, utterly and perfectly loving and moral God, reality would be nothing more than what our poor and imperfect failings would make it. Without a transcendent God Who is perfectly moral and just, we human beings would too quickly rationalize immorality and injustice as being good things. The transcendently perfect God is powerful enough to defeat even death itself! So, the first "person," the first "role," if you will, that God plays in relation to the world is as this transcendently Holy Perfect One.

But, second, God is also **personal**. For you see, a God who was only transcendent might well be a God who was also utterly aloof and apart from us too.

There were those in the 18th century, called Deists, who believed that God indeed was utterly transcendent in this sense, that God had launched the world into being and then stepped back to simply watch it all play out, unmoved by the aims and aspirations, the sorrows and successes, the pain and the glories of human life. But through the man Jesus – who was truly human and truly knows what our lives are like -- God is shown to be **personal**, not aloof and apart and un-caring. God is not just powerful and utterly other, but is also the one who cares, who cares about you and me and even the sparrows. In Jesus – the second “person” of the Trinity – we see the “role” that God plays in relating to creation: a role, a way of being, that is indeed personal and caring and affected by human beings, not unmoved and aloof. So, the twin roles of God the Creator and Jesus the Son show God as **both** Holy and Other AND as personal and caring.

But what of the third “person,” the third role, the third way that God relates to the world: the Holy Spirit. We understand the idea of God the Father; we can relate to Jesus the Son. But what do we do with this whole notion of the Holy Spirit? It seems much less concrete, much more vague, and we wonder why it is even necessary. In fact, a recent comedy website, *The Onion*, did a fake press release that in its own irreverent way raises exactly these questions about the need for this idea of the Holy Spirit:

Dateline Heaven: Calling the Holy Trinity "overstaffed and over budget," God announced plans Monday to downsize the group by slowly phasing out the Holy [Spirit]. "Given the poor economic climate and the unclear nature of the Holy [Spirit's] duties, I felt this was a sensible and necessary decision," God said. "The Holy [Spirit] will be given fewer and fewer responsibilities until His formal resignation from Trinity.... Thereafter, the Father and the Son shall be referred to

as the Holy Duo.²

What **would** our faith lose if we didn't have this idea of the Holy Spirit? Can it still play a role in our understanding of the Christian faith? Yes. Absolutely. Our scripture this morning from the Gospel of John focuses on Jesus telling the disciples that unless he leaves them, the Holy Spirit won't be able to come into the world to continue the witness and work of God the Creator and Jesus the Christ. And did you notice the word Jesus used to describe the Holy Spirit: **Advocate**. Now, an "advocate" is one who literally "speaks for" someone or something. And that's in fact the crucial job of the Holy Spirit: to speak for, as Jesus says, righteousness and sin and judgment. The job of the Holy Spirit is to be present even now in your life and mine, in the lives of institutions and organizations, to remind us that belief in God does not just about warm and fuzzy feelings, but also comes with responsibilities to speak out for, to work for, justice and righteousness. Without the work of the Holy Spirit in the here and now, it would be too easy for you and I to sentimentalize Jesus, to make Him more like our Best Buddy, to forget that Jesus had some pretty hard and demanding things to say about those who abuse the poor and the hurting and destitute and the hungry and the homeless. If it's just "me and Jesus," then it becomes all-too-easy to simply and only revel in my relationship to Him.

But Jesus says that while He indeed loves you and me with a love that will not let us go, the Holy Spirit also is the person, the role, which always reminds us that we can never rest easy or satisfied or smug when others are suffering unnecessarily. I still remember as a child the restrooms and the water fountains and the doors labeled "White" and "Colored." I will never forget the church member in Hawaii whose family was transported 3500 miles from home and interned in a desolate desert camp and who was told "You're just damn Japs; be glad you've got even this." I will never forget

²www.theonion.com/articles/god-quietly-phasing-holy-ghost-out-of-trinity,3156

the searing images of Matthew Shepherd hog-tied to a fence in Wyoming and beaten to death simply because he had been created to love the “wrong” persons, or my teenage friend who could only tell me forty years after the fact of all the verbal and physical abuse he had taken because of the way he was made. I sometimes cannot sleep at night when I think of the story I read of the nine-year-old girl who ran away from home and who was set upon by a sex trafficker and finally found her release through taking her own life. As we worship here this morning in freedom this morning, I recall the awful story of the Christian family in China who was tortured and almost killed for the crime of being Christian and owning a Bible.

No, in the face of a world where such things occur, it is a very *good* thing to say “Jesus loves me” but it is not *enough* to say. For we **must** go on and say “thanks be to God” that that Holy Spirit, that Advocate for justice and righteousness, moved in the lives of people and institutions so that justice might be more and more achieved, that the abuse of the helpless might be ever more ameliorated, that the castigation of and even violence toward of people for being different or for whom they love, is slowly but surely ever more seen as an evil affront. Do we need the Holy Spirit? Oh my yes. I know I do. When I am tempted to narrow the circle of who is worthy, the Spirit tells me to widen it. When I am tempted by racism or xenophobia or homophobia or sexism or any of those ways of drawing lines between the supposedly better and worse, the Spirit says “Stop it.” When I am tempted to give into jadeness and cynicism about the poor that Jesus Himself said were the very index of how we treated him, the Spirit says “Get over it and get back out there.”

One the Disciples’ sister church families, the United Church of Christ, has a profound and succinct way of capturing what the Holy Spirit does in its slogan “*God is still speaking.*” Now, it would be so much easier if God were **not** still speaking through the Spirit, was **not** always at work to move us forward, to call us to greater faithfulness,

to risk new things, to “testify,” as Jesus puts it in our scripture this morning, to what God has done for us and what God can yet do for those who don’t know the power, the healing, and the hope of the good news. But that Spirit **is** indeed doing so, calling us, luring us, prodding us, to work for righteousness in a world that knows too little of grace, too little of hope; a world where too often people fight and die over stupid things that grieve God. And so, far from being a superfluous and silly thing, this idea of the Trinity can indeed be a tool by which we testify of a God who is awesome and transcendent, a God who through Jesus is personal and never aloof, a God who through the Spirit at work now lures this world towards greater beauty, greater justice, greater hope, greater healing. *“God in three persons, blessed Trinity.”* Amen.