

Charles R. Blaisdell, Sr. Pastor
First Christian Church
Colorado Springs, Colorado
August 24, 2014
©2014

“God In Three Persons...?”

(Proverbs 8:1-7) "Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice? 2 On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; 3 beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out: 4 "To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live. 5 O simple ones, learn prudence; acquire intelligence, you who lack it. 6 Hear, for I will speak noble things, and from my lips will come what is right; 7 for my mouth will utter truth; wickedness is an abomination to my lips.

(John 15:26-27, 16:7, 13-14) "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."....16:7 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. ... 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 had a worship style similar to our own in many ways. We had a pipe organ, a somewhat formal order to the service, we tended to only sing the more “majestic,” if you will, hymns, and the church’s architecture was also majestic, 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 – or as “high church” as Disciples get – there was one hymn we never sang the words to as they had penned by its author, the hymn which opens and close our worship today, “Holy, Holy, Holy.” The 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.” I never recall a sermon on the doctrine of the Trinity. In fact, for those of us who lived in Ft. Worth, when you heard or said the words “the Trinity” you meant the river by that name that ran through the city and from whose banks you could spend a lazy evening fishing for catfish. For

even among us “high church” Disciples, we nonetheless had a “low church” theology and the doctrine of the Trinity simply never came up in any way that I recall – except as something to have a little gentle fun 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.

Now, such an attitude is actually pretty presumptuous, isn't it? And while dismissing those things that you don't understand is hardly a trait limited to the Disciples, it is not a trait that furthers a thoughtful church anywhere. Every once in awhile, as I've done for the past five years with you, I like to preach a sermon on one of the basic doctrines or fundamental ideas of the Christian faith. So, we've had sermons on baptism and communion and salvation and what happens at the end of time and lots of other topics that are important to the faith. But I've never preached a sermon on “the Trinity.” But today, I want to do so, even though for most members of Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) congregations this notion does not loom very large. Yet among the vast majority of our Christian brothers and sisters, it looms large indeed. The most ancient creeds of the Church, the Nicene Creed and the Apostles Creed, begin with an invocation of the Trinity. And we do ourselves a disservice when we dismiss out of hand 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 probably no issue that was fought over more than what is meant by “the Trinity.” Much ink was spilled on it. More than one church council was convened in the first 500 years of the church's life to deal with it. Those who found themselves on the losing side of discussions about it found themselves labeled heretics and were sometimes executed for their beliefs. We may find it hard to imagine such passion over such a thing, 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, makes a huge difference. Our beliefs can make our lives better or worse, more beautiful or more jaded. Now, I cannot possibly say everything that could be said on the topic of the Trinity in one sermon, I do want to say a few things about why this idea of the Trinity is actually an important one for your faith and mine. So for the next few minutes, join me in that endeavor as perhaps we all learn more about this ancient doctrine of the Church Universal.

“God in three persons, blessed Trinity.” The very first thing we need to know is that this is one of those places in our faith tradition where we – along with lots of other people in the history of the church – 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. For you see, the word “person” is a third-hand translation for the actual Greek word that the debate about the Trinity used,¹ a word that is actually best translated as “substance” or “reality.” But due to linguistic quirks, the word first got translated into Latin as *personae*, and then into English as *person*. But the key, important, essential thing to keep in mind here is that when the earliest Christians were talking about the Trinity, they were actually discussing and asking about the **fundamental reality** of how God acts, the **very substance** of the way things ultimately are, the crucial question of **how Jesus is fundamentally related to God**.

And the answer, by the way, is not obvious. How *are* God and Christ related, for example? Even the gospel accounts differ here. Mark’s account of Jesus can be read

¹There is a brief overview of hypostasis and the related Trinitarian issues at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hypostasis_%28religion%29

as saying that Jesus only became the Son of God when He was baptized and when He accepted his mission from God. The Gospel of John, though, says that Christ was “pre-existent” with God from all eternity; “in the beginning was the Word and the Word was God and the Word was with God.” Yet Luke’s gospel suggests that Jesus as the Son of God, the Christ, happened at Jesus’ earthly birth there in Bethlehem. The same questions arise when thinking about what is meant by “the Spirit.” For example, is the Spirit that is sent to the disciples on Pentecost simply, in some fashion, what we might call the “ghost” of Jesus? Was there no Spirit until Jesus’ death, when he then lived on as the Holy Spirit? What does “the Spirit” of Jesus attest to about ultimate reality?

And yet with that question, I think we can begin to see a glimmer of what we can and should say this morning about this notion of the Trinity – and why it is a profound notion for us that tells us something important about God and ourselves. That glimmer is this: **all** language, when applied to God, is metaphorical. So, when, in our Old Testament reading for this morning, “Wisdom” is identified as God’s “companion,” this is not meant as saying that there was another god-like being who God kept company with. Rather, it is the same sort of metaphorical use that **we** might use when instead of saying that a man has always been happy we say “happiness has been his lifelong companion.” Language about God is **always** metaphorical. Is God literally male? No, of course not. Is God female, no. But when we use words like father, mother, guide, friend, and so on we are not making a *literal* claim in the same way I would be when I say that Barbara is the mother of our children. 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 same with this notion of the Trinity. To see this, let’s return to the way this was formulated in the early church – but this time, not through the lens of those who were steeped in the Greek language but through those who wrote and thought and

preached in the everyday, common language of the world. Which was then, of course, Latin. And in Latin, the word “personae” didn’t mean what the word “person” means for us. Have any of you ever been to a play? Oftentimes the program for the play will list the cast members under the following heading: *Dramatis Personae*. So, if I haven’t lost you yet, here is where the Trinity is a wonderfully metaphorical idea that captures something important about the faith. For on that theater program what “Dramatis Personae” means is the **roles** that certain folks are playing in the production. And that is what the Trinity finally is: a compact, succinct, metaphorical description of the **roles** that God plays in relation to creation and in relation to humanity. The doctrine of the Trinity is an attempt to describe the ways that God relates to this world. And less metaphorically, we can sum that up in these three ways:

First, God the Creator, the Father, the Mother of us all is **transcendent**. God is beyond us. God is perfect. God is infinitely so much more than we are. God is not limited by the things that limit creation. God is perfectly patient, perfectly loving, perfectly perfect. Which is what *transcendent* means: God transcends us, is beyond us. And that is a good thing. For without a transcendent God, reality is nothing more than our sometimes poor and imperfect flailings 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 acceptable things. So, the first “person,” the first “role,” if you will, that God plays in relation to the world is as the transcendent Holy Other One.

But, second, God is also **personal**. For you see, an utterly and **only** transcendent God could very well be utterly aloof and apart 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 aloof and apart from that world, never relating and never intervening. But in the figure of

Jesus, God is shown to be **personal**, not aloof and apart. God is experienced not only as powerful and utterly other, but is also the one 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, God the Father or God the Creator and Jesus the Son show God as both Holy and Other, but also 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. Our scripture this morning from the Gospel of John focuses on Jesus telling the disciples that unless he leaves them, the 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 so the third thing that the doctrine of the Trinity tells us about God is that God is not only the Creator of the world, and was not at work only in the time of Jesus, but that God is – to use a theologian’s word – **immanent**. Not “imminent,” but “**immanent**.” [Spell it]. Which simply means that God is with us, even now, even always. The work of God is not something just from far off and long ago, nor was the relationship of God to the world ended with the time of Jesus, but God’s role and way of relating to the world continues even now. The fact that God is Holy Spirit is a reminder to us to never somehow think that God no longer acts, no longer works, no longer reveals. A preacher by the name of Mary Anderson puts the point this way: “*The Trinity gives language to [the fact] that our God is not merely a God of history, performing mighty acts only in Bible times, but a powerful, on-the-move God of the present and of the future.*”² It’s tempting, though, to sometimes think so, isn’t it? It would be so much easier if God were **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,

²<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=587>

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.

For when all is said and done, the doctrine of the Trinity can do for us what it did for those early Christians: to be a way to share the Good News. Listen to Rev. Anderson one more time: *"the doctrine of the Trinity was originally formulated to... give words to [our] faith. As Christians in mission, we must be ready to witness to others about what we believe and why we believe it. The early Christians, living in a hostile world, needed to put some definitive language to what they believed... In our hostile world, our witness demands the same thing."*⁸ Now, you may not think this is a "hostile world," but it often is: it is a world that knows too little of grace, too little of hope; a world where too often people fight and die over things that grieve God. Jesus asks the disciples to witness to what God has done for them – and tells them the Spirit will help them to do so. It is what God tells **us** too. And 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.

³ibid.