

Prov. 8:1-4, 22-31

John 16:12-15

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Evie Macway

June 12, 2022 Trinity Sunday

Present Tense of God

As is probably abundantly clear now, between the front of our bulletin, the beautiful banner up here, our first hymn and the strong Trinitarian focus of our liturgy so far, today is Trinity Sunday. This is the Sunday immediately following Pentecost that much of the Christian church sets aside to consider the doctrine of the Trinity. There are not many doctrines of the church that have their own Sunday.

I have often wondered if the powers that be who created our liturgical calendar decided that after all of the excitement of Pentecost Sunday we maybe needed a Sunday to pause and ponder for a bit just who and what this coming Holy Spirit is. The doctrine of the Trinity is at least in part humanity's attempt to do just that. What is this Holy Spirit and how is it related to Jesus Christ, God incarnate, and God the Creator, who sends it?

And the doctrine of the Trinity is after all just that: an attempt. For we know really, that no matter how hard we try, our human words and thoughts cannot contain or convey the fullness of God. We will never answer these questions fully. For God is a mystery that we can only partially understand, and when all is said and done, that's is a good thing.

But our limitation does not mean that conversation and reflection on the doctrine of the Trinity is not a good thing too. For it is as we talk about the Trinity, run up against our limitations and explore the mystery, that we discover new, or maybe rediscover anew ways in which we relate to God and in turn to one another.

This morning we have two pieces of scripture that also help us think about God we confess as three in one. The passage Jan read this morning is a text from the book of Proverbs that defines and describes the Wisdom of God. Most scholars agree that Wisdom here is an Old Testament understanding of the Holy Spirit. Since 'wisdom' is a feminine word in the Hebrew language this aspect of God here in Proverbs is personified as feminine. Here we get one picture of the third person of

the Trinity, as a being who was created, or in some translations of that word in verse 22, ‘was possessed by’ God at the very beginning of God’s work. Before the mountains or the fields, the skies or the waters this Wisdom was beside God, “like a master worker; daily God’s delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.” (Proverbs 8:30) Did any of you read that book, *The Shack*, written several years ago? I think that author got some inspiration for his personification of the Holy Spirit from this passage from Proverbs.

Our second reading for this morning is this passage from John’s gospel. Jesus never preached the doctrine of the Trinity. What Jesus did do is talk about his relationship to God: in the words of Jesus here in John’s gospel, his Father, and the Holy Spirit. One of the places in scripture that is richest with Jesus’ words about these relationships is in this portion of John’s gospel that I mentioned is often referred to as Jesus’ farewell discourse. It is here, in Jesus’ last hours of physically being with his disciples, his closest friends, that we hear his most concrete and profound words on his relationship with God. It is when Jesus is working to convey his steadfast, loving relationship to his disciples that we hear his most eloquent words about his relationship with God. That in itself is worth noting. Our relationships with one another and our relationships with God are intertwined.

With these two passages in our mind, this Trinity Sunday I would like for us to take a few minutes to kind of go back to the basics on the Trinity. For whatever reason, maybe it is because Trinity Sunday this year occurs close to what would have been my father’s 90th birthday and I have been thinking about him, I found myself drawn this week to that most well known language we use for the Trinity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

There are many words for the faces of the Trinity and they are good, helping us to expand our understanding, pushing us to think differently about God. But this morning I would like to look at those familiar three and see what the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have to say to us today.

We start with ‘Father’, probably the most problematic in our traditionally patriarchal dominated culture. So many of us get stuck on this word, me included. I read a blog post this week by Diana Butler Bass that helped me unpack this word in some new ways. She wrote,

Jesus prayed *to* the Father. In Greek, the word is *pater*, from which we derive English words like “patriarchy.” *Pater* is masculine in Greek. While

it can refer to a male parent, *pater* also has wider, more universal meanings and nuances — *pater* refers to life-giver, progenitor, Source, and the one who passes on the potential for likeness. The point of calling God “Father” isn’t divine masculinity. Rather, *pater* here is *Abba* — a word Jesus uses for “Father” — the intimate, relational name that recognizes kinship with the life-giving Source, the progenitor of all that is. Jesus prays to *Abba*, who is love.¹

For some of us this definition of Father-God fits - intimate and loving. This God is someone who protects us from harm, feeds us when we are hungry, provides for our needs, teaches us right from wrong and is always there for us. ‘Mother’ would fit this definition as well. For others of us God as Father, or Mother, may be quite distant or even frightening, especially for those among us who never knew their human father or mother or had a complex and/or difficult relationship with him/her for whatever reason. A parent figure in this instance then is one who is distant - by definition a part of our lives, our Source, but does not truly care and can not be trusted.

These two opposite images - loving, caring provider, definite but distant relation have something in common still however. They describe a God who is over and above us. Words like king, judge and shepherd fit here as well as words like omnipotent and omnipresent. When we think of God, the father/mother, we think of God of all creation, the parent who gave life to all the earth.

There are times when this is precisely the person of the Trinity we need. Julie Adkins, a Presbyterian pastor in Texas wrote this about God, the Father, “When our own lives go out of control, it can be greatly comforting to know that God *is* above all, and *is* ultimately in control. When the news we read and see is all bad, and we feel tempted to despair, we need to be reminded that solving the world’s problems is not our responsibility alone. No matter how improbable it seems in any given moment, God *our father*, our mother, is Lord of all creation. God is, ultimately, the one in charge.”²

In contrast, God the Son is more on our level. And sometimes this is the God we need. God as parent is sort of ‘up there,’ ‘out there,’ ‘over us’, but God the Son

¹ https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/sunday-musings-152?utm_source=email&s=r

² Julie Adkins, *Baptized into What Name?*, <https://www.goodpreacher.com/backissuesread.php?file=14734>

spent time ‘down here’ with us. He experienced temptation. He got tired and frustrated with the demands made on him. He suffered pain. He died.

At times in life when we are suffering and hurting, we can take comfort in knowing that God knows what we are experiencing. Not just knows at an intellectual level, but through the Son, God knows hurt and suffering through personal experience.

And though he did not give into the sin as we do, God the Son knew temptation. If we thought of God only as an all powerful creator, ‘up there’ the courage to confess our wrongs would come harder. But knowing God the Son who faced temptation himself and offered forgiveness to those he met who fell short, frees us to keep trying, falling short and trying again.

Often when we think of God the Son we think of the historical man, Jesus, the one we call Christ, as well we should. It is through the stories of the man Jesus, we read in our scriptures that we come to know the Son of God. In order for God to be fully human among us he must be tied to a point in history. Therefore we often think of the Son of God in the past tense. Yes, we believe that he is alive, that he has gone to be with God and will come again. And we talk of him walking with us, Emmanuel, God with us. But we do believe in all of that, that he is/was human and so when we think of the Son of God we often focus on the past: on the word made flesh two thousand years ago and what he did for us then and what he taught us.

That brings us to the Holy Spirit. Last Sunday we celebrated the coming of the Spirit to the first followers of Jesus, and through that coming the birth of the church of Christ of which we are a part here today. It is the coming Holy Spirit that Jesus speaks of in the scripture we read together this morning in his farewell discourse, as he says good bye to his disciples at the Last Supper. Past moderator of our General Assembly, Susan Andrews calls the Holy Spirit the ‘present tense of God’.³ I like that.

When we think of God here and now most of us think of the Holy Spirit. God who is our comforter, our advocate, in us, among us, infinitely close to us. God who bestows different gifts on different people for the benefit of us all. God who interacts with each of us as unique and special individuals and as a community together.

³ Andrews, Susan R., *The Present Tense of God, Lectionary Homiletics*, April-May 2004, pg. 48.

Sometimes it is God the Holy Spirit we need. Not a powerful father or mother, God of the universe, but simply God of me and God of you. God who gives us each a unique set of gifts and talents not quite like anyone else's. God who prays with us and for us and through us, even and especially when we don't know what or how to pray. At times this is the God we need more than any other.

This Trinity Sunday we celebrate God whom we most often have called Father, Son and Holy Spirit: three faces of one God. Three names that carry a rich tradition and meaning for us as Christians and continue to deepen and enrich our relationship with God.

We will never fully grasp the mystery of God, and that is a good thing. Father, Mother, Creator, Son, Man, Redeemer, Emmanuel, Prince of Peace, Friend, Holy Spirit, Wisdom, Sustainer, Comforter. Beyond what our words can ever contain. On this Trinity Sunday we celebrate that mystery, and rejoice in the power, the love and the presence of God.