

Understanding the Trinity
Sermon, June 12th, 2022
Trinity Sunday

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Happy Holy Trinity Sunday!

What I like about Holy Trinity Sunday is that it's one of the days where we get to wear white and gold. And I like wearing the best, fanciest, shiniest thing!

But I want to begin this morning with a bit of a reality check. And I hope you'll tell the truth here.

How many folks here had a moment in the past week when what you wondered about most was the Trinity? How many of you wondered, this past week, about how the three persons of the Trinity are related to each other?

(One person, on Zoom, raised their hand.)

Now you can see the number one reason why every preacher I know dreads Holy Trinity Sunday. It seems, to be frank, that we're answering questions that no one's asking.

What I realize this week is that one of the reasons that this is problematic is precisely the way that I've framed the question; that the Church's problem – I'm going to call it a problem, though the Church may not – the problem with the teachings or the doctrine about the Trinity is that we've turned things around, or upside-down, at least.

Now, clearly, we value the Holy Trinity. I mean, the phrase "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" shows up in liturgy more than anything else. We say it over and over again in our liturgy.

But it seems to me that we have things upside down, because the ideas about the Trinity, the articulation of this theology or doctrine, was born in the *experience* of the people of God, and of God. It was born in experience.

In fact, one of the best definitions I know of theology is that theology is faith seeking understanding. Not the other way around. But somehow, it seems to me that we've flipped the script and we taught *about* the Trinity as if teaching *about* God creates the *experience* of God, when at least for me and for many of you, I know it's the *experience* of God that brings questions and thinking, and we seek understanding, and *then* we give names to things.

It's as if we teach about the Holy Trinity because somehow this legitimizes folks' experience of God, or it tells them how to find God, and maybe it has worked that way for you. But for generations, what it seems to me is that we've *experienced* a creator and creation. We have found, in the created world, in the beauty of a hike or a walk, in the beauty of a flower, or certainly in the beauty of a human face. We have *experienced* God.

We've experienced that "more than," right? That what we know in creation is somehow more than just cells put together, and that more than we call God, the creator. And many of us have experienced God in the teachings and

reading about the life and the ministry of Jesus. And we find there is something compelling that draws us to a mystery that we don't quite know, that is God.

And then, somehow, we experience the ongoing presence of Jesus, in us and among us, with us, in a way that we call the Holy Spirit. And what the church confesses is that we experience these ways of knowing or finding God as continuous, rather than separate. Or, as one rather than three. Does this match anyone else's experience more than trying to read about the Holy Trinity and trying to figure it out?

These three, of course, are not the limit of our experience of God. But they're a signpost. And they help us, perhaps as categories, to recognize God when we experience God. But they are also not exclusive. And we see that, especially today, in the first reading that Thad read for us. Because from as early as the 4th century, Christians began to identify Lady Wisdom, or Sophia, with Jesus. In fact, some understand Jesus to be the embodiment of Wisdom that is taught throughout the book of Proverbs and other Hebrew Bible texts.

And there is something to hear today, for us, in the Proverbs reading that resonates with our experience with God. Now, if we had read several chapters, instead of parts of one chapter, we would have seen that the narrative pits what we sometimes call Strange Lady – that will be her name – against the Lady of Wisdom. And these two have competing visions of what flourishing life might look like.

Now this, I must admit, matches some of my experience. I don't need to go any farther than a couple of apps on my phone to find folks who want to sell me competing visions of flourishing life. And what Proverbs says is that Lady Wisdom is alluring in a beauty that is grounded in virtue, in strength, and in justice. And that in following Lady Wisdom and her teachings, we find a way to flourishing life.

As an aside, Strange Lady is also portrayed as quite alluring, but not so much in virtue or in justice.

The Wisdom in the reading that Thad read for us describes her own being and her ground, her origins, as being in relationship to God. This points to, I think, the one thing about the Trinity that no doubt you've heard other folks say, but I will say again.

What ancient folks, and indeed the Church, has not ever imagined, is a God that is solitary and isolated and alone. The very heart of God is relationship and community.

This week, I saw something of competing visions of flourishing life, particularly about community. In a post from a pastor who I do not know but is a part of a conversation group that I'm a part of, the pastor posted and said, what do you do if you're a pastor and you've had so much upheaval in your personal life, and so much grief, that you have nothing left to give?

It's not the first time someone's asked that question, and I'm sure each of you as parents, or as friends, or as neighbors, or as workers, have had moments where you've asked yourself that very same thing. There are people who want from me, people who I have commitments to, and I'm at a place where I feel like I have nothing to give.

It was interesting to watch the responses to this pastor. I bet you could guess: nine tenths of them were about self-care. They were about how you, pastor, should find ways to take some time off, get a massage, etc. Get some self-care.

And then there were a few responses that looked a little longer term and were about patterns of creating sustainability in your life. How this pastor could create sustainable patterns of self-care, and how they could convince the congregation to understand the pastor's need for self-care.

But I want to say, throughout all of them – and the responses were all from ordained people throughout the Church – it was all about self. I found myself in the context of thinking about the Holy Trinity, wondering: what if we had said, what does a flourishing community look like?

Might it be the case that in a flourishing community, there is no one person who is responsible for caring for everyone? What if in a flourishing community, it's not always so much about self-care, because we are mutually interdependent, and mutually caring for each other all along the way? Do you see how that's different?

I believe that with a model of relationship at the heart of God, of three that are not separate but are one, somewhere in that is a model for how we can be to each other and with each other. It's not that we have no boundaries, but it is that we care for others, and for ourselves, and we trust that others care for us, because they do.

So, one of the things that we see in the scripture about wisdom is that God's very heart is in relationship. I want to highlight another piece that we see in wisdom that I think is probably there in the life of Jesus, but if wisdom, in fact, is embodied in Jesus; if wisdom is part of the understanding of the Church as what the Christ event is, it's intriguing for me to notice that wisdom *plays*.

Wisdom, in this passage, delights, it finds joy in creation, and *plays*. One of my favorites of the newer translations of the scriptures translates the last verse or two of this Proverbs reading saying this (paraphrasing): I was having fun, I was smiling, I was frolicking, I was delighting in human.

How long has it been since we thought of play or fun as an expression of wisdom? It's probably been more recent if you live with children in your home, I'm guessing. How long has it been since we thought about our capacity for joy, and our exercise of it, as a divine gift? Indeed, as part of the Trinity?

One of my theology professors many years ago, as theologians are wont to do, looked for images and metaphors to help in understanding the Trinity. This theologian said that if you imagine three persons tossing a Frisbee between themselves, that the Trinity is actually the Frisbee game rather than any one individual. It's the interplay, it's the interaction, it's the relatedness, it's the constant movement without boundaries.

This delight, or play, opens us up to the world in new ways, doesn't it? When we play, we have some boundaries, but we're not concerned about whether what we're doing is consistent with the teaching, but rather that we're open to new experiences.

So, this morning, as we celebrate and call to mind the teaching of the Church of the Holy Trinity, I wonder where you have experienced God. I wonder what kinds of different places you have experienced God, and how they may remind you of God as Creator, of God as Jesus, real and earthy and alive, and God as ongoing, Spirit among us and in us, that beckons us to follow the way of life, and beckons us to play, and to frolic.

I wonder where you might experience God in the coming week. I wonder what it might look like. And I wonder how those experiences of God will change and transform us, and equip us to transform, also, a world that longs for flourishing life.

So, to this God, known to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be honor and glory today and for ever more.

Amen.

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

Does not wisdom call,
and does not understanding raise her voice?

On the heights, beside the way,
at the crossroads she takes her stand;

beside the gates in front of the town,
at the entrance of the portals she cries out:

“To you, O people, I call,
and my cry is to all that live.

The LORD created me at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of long ago.

Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.

When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.

Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was brought forth--

when God had not yet made earth and fields,
or the world's first bits of soil.

When God established the heavens, I was there,
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,

when God made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,

when God assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command,

when God marked out the foundations of the earth,
then I was beside him, like a master worker;

and I was daily God's delight,
rejoicing before him always,

rejoicing in God's inhabited world
and delighting in the human race."

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."