

We Believe: The Trinity  
John 20:19-23, Romans 5:1-5  
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights  
June 3 (Trinity Sunday)  
Pastor Dave Carver

You all know calendars, right? Our lives are full of them. We've got calendars on the refrigerators, calendars in our cell phones, calendars at the office. We've got baseball schedules and dental appointments and school exams and who knows what else – all on the calendars of our lives. Over the past few years, our congregation has been paying increased attention to the Liturgical Calendar. That's the calendar that starts on the first Sunday of Advent – about four weeks before Christmas – and walks us through the life of Christ and the rhythms of worship before finally ending up on Christ the King Sunday, when we celebrate the fact that Jesus is going to return.

According to the liturgical calendar, today is Trinity Sunday. Unlike virtually every other day on our church calendar, this is not a celebration of an event. On Christmas, we celebrate what? Jesus' birth. Easter points us toward what? The resurrection of the Lord. Last week, we remembered the celebration of Pentecost, which reminds us of what? The gift of the Holy Spirit. But today, Trinity Sunday, we are pointed not towards an event or even a person, but an idea. A doctrine.

And not just any doctrine, but a difficult one. What does it mean, exactly, to say that God is Father, Son, and Spirit? That the Godhead consists of three persons who are co-equal, co-eternal? How do we understand the one in three?

Perhaps this paragraph from *Principles of Christian Theology* might help:

Holy Being, then, has let itself be known in the Christian community of faith under the Trinitarian symbolism of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, on God. These three "persons", however, are not just three stages in the community's experience, or three temporal phases in God's self-manifestation, but belong together in the "substance" of the Godhead, that is to say, in Being; for Being has let itself be understood not as monolithic but as, so to speak, the energy of letting-be, and the "persons" are – and again we must say, "so to speak" – movements within this dynamic yet stable mystery that we call "Being".<sup>1</sup>

Good. Any questions? I think that just about clears it up.

Yikes! It's no wonder that Dorothy Sayers once said, in answer to the question, "What is church's teaching about the doctrine of the Trinity?" the typical Christian might well respond, "The Father incomprehensible, the Son

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<sup>1</sup> John Macquarrie (New York: Scribners, 1977), p. 198.

incomprehensible, and the whole thing incomprehensible. Something put in by theologians to make it more difficult – nothing to do with daily life or ethics.”

But of course, that’s not true. From the earliest days of the Christian church, God’s people have understood that God’s nature is known in several different ways. In 325 A.D., the church responded to a conflict within its ranks by working on what we now know as the Nicene Creed, which, as well as anything, clarifies the doctrine of the Trinity by declaring belief in One God, Father, Son, and Spirit.

The early believers were not interested in creating logic problems to be solved; they weren’t interested in playing word games. These first believers saw in the doctrine of the Trinity something that would be helpful to them in their daily lives. As they reflected on their own experience in the light of the Scriptures, they found that they had to go beyond the language of the Bible and help later Christians, including us, to see that God’s presence in our lives and in the world can be understood best by referring to God as Father, Son, and Spirit – one God who is above all and through all and in all.

These Christians were well aware, of course, that using any human language to describe the divine reality would be limiting. To say that God is Father, Son, and Spirit could connote to someone that God and Jesus are in different places, as are human fathers and sons; it could imply some kind of sexual activity on the part of the Supreme Being; it might suggest that God came first and Jesus came later... Using our limited language might bring us to the point where we see what Duke theologian Mary McClintock Fulkerson is talking about when she suggests that it might sound as if the church is saying that God is "two boys and a bird."<sup>2</sup>

The doctrine of the Trinity made some news last year at our church’s General Assembly, when that group “received” a paper that pointed that the traditional language for God has some limitations and invited the church to explore other terminology for the Lord. There were some sensational claims made about this paper, which lifted up some feminist theology and some very unorthodox vocabulary – but the essence of the paper was sound: human language is insufficient to describe Divine reality. Unfortunately, there are some of our brothers and sisters in the Lord who are so upset about the willingness to even consider new language about God that they are talking about leaving the Presbyterian Church. Today, one of our sister congregations is taking a vote as to whether or not to leave the Presbytery – and a large part of the conflict there has to do with what we do, or do not believe, about the Trinity.

Today, when we talk about the Trinity, we typically try to explain it. We talk about an egg which is shell, yolk, and white; or about water that is solid, liquid, and gas; or about a musical chord that consists of three or more equal but different notes. All of those analogies break down, of course; even worse, they

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<sup>2</sup> *The Christian Century*, <http://www.christiancentury.org/article.lasso?id=2212>

lead us to focus on the idea, rather than the God that is behind the idea.

The reality is that even though every week I send you out of here in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit; even though every person that has been baptized in this room has been baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, most of us don't actually think or talk about the Trinity very often.

Today, I'd like to break that pattern by making a few observations about how this doctrine helps us to know more of God and God's intentions for us. It seems to me that the notion of a Triune God is incredibly helpful in our daily lives.

For starters, as we consider the Trinity, we affirm that although God is one, God is relational in essence. God always exists in community. To be God is to be in relationship. The Father does not exist apart from the Son or the Spirit, and similarly, neither the Spirit nor the Son exists in the absence of the Father.

So if we are created in the image of a God who is relational, that would imply that we, too, are created to be in relationship. We are knowable. We are known. God, too, is knowable. God is personal. You are not here celebrating an idea or a theory, you are here worshipping a being who has, in some sense, personality.

And if God is relational and knowable, then as someone who is made in the image of that God, I can know God. And in the strength of that, I can know meaning and purpose for my life.

What a relief! You are not responsible for creating meaning and purpose in your own life! You are given that by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Jesus, in John, says, "As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you." And then he gives them the presence of the Holy Spirit. Your life, and my life – they are not a series of accidents waiting to happen: they are responses to a commission that we have been given by God the Son – Jesus the Christ.

And because my life has meaning and purpose assigned to it by the creator, redeemer, and sustainer of the universe, there is no place that I can go where I do not have access to the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Paul, writing to his friends in Rome, talks about the fact that even in his sufferings, he can boast, because even in those times, he has found that he can learn more of God's love and God's purpose. His character is nurtured even in those times, he says, by the reality of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The doctrine of the Trinity is not some sort of Rubik's Cube thrown at you by the church: "You want to be a *real* Christian? Then figure *this* out, and we'll get back to you."

And the doctrine of the Trinity is not some sort of "litmus test" whereby we

say that we've all got to have the same mindset that existed in Asia Minor in the fourth century; or that we've always got to use the same imprecise words to describe the inexpressible realities of the Lord who created, saved, and sustains us.

Instead, the doctrine of the Trinity is GOOD NEWS. It is the Gospel in a nutshell. It is the truth of God's power, God's love, God's redemption, God's sustaining presence, God's promises in your life and in mine. God is with you. God is for you. God is in you. And in that strength, you are free to go out into the world and live as Christ's own, building communities and mirroring God's presence into every aspect of your own life. Thanks be to God! Amen.