

## “The Trinity”

*Psalm 8; John 16:12-15*

June 12, 2022

As most of you know, I spent several years before I was called into the ministry working as a chef. During that time, I discovered that one of my favorite cuisines comes from right here in the United States. They call it Cajun food and I love it. As I learned to cook Cajun dishes, I was taught that almost all of their food begins with a sauté of celery, bell peppers and onions. In fact, these three ingredients are so essential to the flavor that people down in the Bayou call them the Trinity. If you were to ever come across a true Cajun cookbook, you'd find the Trinity listed as an ingredient with little explanation as to what it is. You see, it's just a given, no further description is necessary.

One time, when I was working at a restaurant, it was my task to make the soup du jour. I planned on making a great gumbo. But I got pressed for time. Instead of dicing up all the ingredients of the trinity, I just chopped up a bunch of onions and went with it. I left out the celery and the peppers. Turns out, those Cajuns know what they're doing. When the Executive Chef tasted the soup, he said, and I quote “something's missing. Fix it!” You see, the Trinity of celery, onions and bell peppers is so important in forming true Cajun flavors that you'll never find a dish that contains anything less than all three of its parts. When I tried to shortcut the process, it just didn't work out nearly as well. It's the melding of the three ingredients that creates something which transcends the individual parts.

I can think of no better way than this to describe how our Christian Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit saturate our life. We experience God in three ways and we feel Him permeate us, enriching our lives with depth and taste, each part contributing its own unique flavor to our soul. Perhaps because the idea of one God in three persons is so difficult to grasp at times, we've seen through the centuries a tendency to overemphasize one of the persons above the others and things got out of sorts.

For many of the early years of our nation, Christians in America focused upon the almightiness of God the Father. The sermons of Cotton Mather and others all dwelt heavily on God's power and his ability to punish us. Read “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” and you'll see what I mean. What passed as Christianity was little more than a cowering fear of God's wrath. Christ's love and humanity wasn't particularly talked about nor were the gifts of the Spirit. Then, Christianity in American probably overcompensated by focusing too much on Jesus Christ to the near exclusion of God the Father and the Holy Spirit. What a friend we have in Jesus. And we do. But by overemphasizing Christ's humanity we lost touch with God's power and God's Spirit working within us, calling us to lead righteous lives. So, we lost touch with the Holiness of God and how God provided us with a partner to help us obey Him. After all, Jesus was our friend and friends don't really expect that much from one another. Friends let one another slide, right?

Finally, after that era, American Christianity moved to an unhealthy fixation on the Spirit. In fact, the gifts of the Spirit are so good for us, they say, that little room was left for God the Father and God-in-Christ. We hear people telling us from tele-pulpits that the spirit is going to anoint us, the Spirit is going to give us high-paying jobs and money and power. It's the Spirit, they say with little care for Christ's teachings on poverty and humility.

And again, we're out of whack. It seems to me that when we fail to embrace each individual part of our Christian Trinity, our faith becomes imbalanced. We're to treasure each of the divine persons and their work in our lives equally. If we don't, we miss the *glorious mystery* of our Triune God. We'll discover the spiritual flavor in our lives to be weak and tasteless. *You see, it's the recognition that God is operating in our lives not just in ONE way but in THREE WAYS that leads us to a sense of amazement which fills us with God's joy.*

Methodist bishop Will Willimon suggests that through the Trinity, “we experience God in three ways: as something *beyond* us; something *among* us; and something *within* us.” God is beyond, among and within us through the three persons of the Trinity. Scripture points our way forward.

In our Isaiah passage, we witness the divine vision of the prophet Isaiah. He encounters God the Father, resplendent upon his throne with six-winged seraphs soaring above Him that otherworldly entourage chanting “*Holy, Holy, Holy is the LORD Almighty, the whole earth is full of His Glory.*” The mere voices of the seraphs shake the Temple, filling it with smoke. No doubt, this is one of the key ingredients in the Trinity, THIS portrait of God the Father presented to us by the prophet Isaiah. Our God is a God of power and amazement,

able to call angels and seraphs to His side. Holy and Almighty is our God. This is God beyond us. Beyond our capability to fully understand. Beyond our ability to contain.

In our reading from the Gospel of John, we see a picture of God the Son. God among us. John shows us Jesus Christ, He one who came from the Father's love to give us eternal life. Our God chose to live with us, to share our experiences so that we might be brought closer to Him. And best of all, He's a human. A carpenter, a humble teacher - a servant who's brought us eternal pardon from our sin. In the flesh, Jesus taught us about salvation, about loving one another, about sacrifice. And yes, Jesus Christ is very much our friend.

Looking at our reading from Romans, we see the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives. God within us. Paul tells us that "*whenever we cry Abba, Father*" it is the Spirit of God bearing witness through us that we are indeed the children of God.

No matter how much we believe our faith is a function of our free-will, it is always the result of the Spirit stirring inside of us. It's the Spirit that draws us towards God. By ourselves, we're not capable of responding to the Lord. Left to our own devices, we can't recognize God, even while standing in the middle of his wondrous creation. But with the Holy Spirit, we are more than conquerors. We can even overcome our sinful natures. Paul's letter to the Romans teaches us that whenever we choose the good over the bad, the light over the dark, we're not operating alone. Even single time we make decisions which glorify God, we're being indwelt by the Holy Spirit. God beyond us, God among us, God within us. Our Scripture readings show how each person of our Triune God contributes such wonderful flavor to our spiritual lives.

Now does this mean we completely understand the Trinity? Do we fully get how God is internally? Not really. We've seen glimpses into some functions of our Triune God yet to claim that we can reduce the glory of God to a formula is a mistake. As Christians we profess that there's only ONE God. We confess that the God IS the Father, that God IS the Son and that God IS the Holy Spirit. We confess that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three distinct persons. Does this make sense? Could we plot out an algebraic formula from the things we profess and have any chance of arriving at a correct answer? Probably not.

How the three persons of our ONE God work remains a mystery to us. What we can safely say about this mystery is called by theologians a perichoretic union. At least, that's what they call it in seminary.

Several years ago, I led a book club at a church. We read a novel called "The Shack." It's a really good book and I commend it's reading to everyone. But perhaps what it does best of all it to help us visualize the Trinity. And the manner in which the novel does it is quite captivating. In the book, the main character is given the opportunity to encounter God. And it isn't in a chorus of angels or a whirlwind or a cloud with a thundering voice. Oddly enough, it's three people sitting at a dinner table. There, a heavyset African American woman, a Middle Eastern Man and an Asian woman sit at a dinner table. They pass this wonderful food around, chatting with each other, asking one another about their day. Through the entire meal, they routinely profess their deep love and appreciation for one another. Best of all, they invite the main character to participate in the meal. They ask him to share the blessing and join them in eating the sumptuous food. The African American woman, Eloisa who represents God the Father explains things even further to Mack, the main character. She says, "We are not three Gods and we are not talking about one God with three attitudes, like a man who is husband, father and worker. I am one God and I am three persons and each of the three is fully and entirely one. What's important is this: If I were simply One God in One Person, then you would find yourself in this Creation without something wonderful, without something essential even. And I would be utterly other than I am. I am love and relationship. All love and relationship are only possible for you ONLY because it already exists within me."

Truth be told, I kind of wish that while I was at seminary, we could have read this depiction of the Trinity. It makes a whole lot more sense than "perichoretic union." The Trinity is wonderful sharing of love between three distinct persons, all comprising one unique and wonderful God. It's the love that exists between these three in one that leads to our creation, our redemption and our resurrection. But even though we can come up with imaginative ways to think about the Trinity, we don't completely understand it.

The Trinity is something of an enigma to us - a wondrous mystery which saturates our lives with the grandeur of God. It's this divine mystery of the Trinity that gives our spiritual life fullness and flavor. But at the same time, it generates awe within us, to others it seems downright irrational. Trinity must be rejected as illogical some say. Three persons, one God sounds to them like pure fantasy. But such thinking makes human reason

the sole criterion for rejecting the Trinity. Critics would say “If we can’t figure it out, it must be untrue.”

Our modern society today is very much the continuation of the Enlightenment which began nearly 200 years ago. The Enlightenment yielded extraordinary advances in medicine and science and for that we should all be grateful. But it was during this heady period, scholars started to think that what could not be logically accounted for was likely untrue. If it couldn’t be boiled in a beaker, dissected in a laboratory or plotted on axis, it was just fantasy, plain and simple.

Now look, I don’t think we can scientifically PROVE that the Trinity is a real...and yet, we feel it. When we engage ourselves through prayer, worship and Scripture, we wrap ourselves up in this delectable mystery of the Trinity and it fills us completely in a way that human reason and thinking never can. You know, I think this mystery is only partially revealed to us by God for a reason.

One analogy for this might come through our culture. Have you ever read a really good book? Me, I like mystery novels? There’s a point in every one of these books where the mystery is just about to be revealed. A place in the book where the author has given just enough information into the whodunit to keep people on the very edge of their seats. Our mind races and whirrs, fully enjoying the mystery and its many potential outcomes. It’s at that point where our hearts and minds are most fully engaged in the text. We savor every word. We relish every revelation given to us. Then, the solution comes. We know who did it. If you’re like me, sometimes I find the rest of the novel to be, well, anticlimactic. My attention wanes. The enjoyment of the mystery is over. Finished.

The Trinity is a Holy mystery that will never fully reveal itself to us on this side of the hereafter. We can press against the mystery by reading the Bible. We can feel the wonders of the mystery by praying and worshipping. We can experience the mystery physically as we take in the Sacraments. Yet the wisdom of the ages is that this mystery alone is inexhaustible. Our enjoyment of the Triune God is never ending...infinite because God is infinite. The more we stand in the middle of the mystery of the Trinity the more we are drawn into the righteousness of God. We have One God in Three Persons, inexplicable yet still beautiful beyond words, beyond compare.

Perhaps church historian Justo Gonzales said it best when he wrote “The Trinity is a mystery, NOT a puzzle. Love is a mystery while a crossword is a puzzle. You try to solve the puzzle; you stand in awe before a mystery.”

Father, Son and Holy Spirit. May we all enjoy the mystery. Amen.