

Into All the Truth
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
The First Presbyterian Church, New Canaan – June 12, 2022

Please Read:
Romans 5:1-5
John 16:12-15

The story is told of a Scottish boy being examined for confirmation. “Laddie,” the minister asked, “do you understand the catechism?” “Aye, Domine,” he replied, “I understand every word of it, *and it dinna mean a thing!*”

Interpretation theorists like Paul Ricoeur or E. D. Hirsch Jr. would say the boy comprehended the *sense* of the catechism (what it says) but had no interest in its *reference* (how it says it) and therefore could not discern in it any *significance* for his life (what it really means).¹ I think many of us have the same problem with the doctrine of the Trinity! I love how Nadia Bolz-Weber playfully explains the doctrine:

So let's get right down to it, shall we? Here we go: God is 3 persons and one being. God is one and yet three. The father is not the son or the Spirit, the son is not the father or the Spirit, the spirit is not the Father or the Son. But the Father Son and Spirit all are God and God is one. ... So, to review, 1+1+1=1. That's simple enough.

As delightful as it is to make fun of ourselves and what most people consider an embarrassing and even irrelevant doctrine that nobody really “gets,” I believe the Trinity is one of the most important doctrines of the Church for today, and our *understanding*, but even more importantly, our *experience* of the Triune God is what our broken world needs most. And I hope and pray that as Jesus’ promised, the Spirit will lead us “into all truth” and will help us to live into the fullness of the Trinity and share our experience with the larger community.

Even in our gospel text, the understanding of God as a *community of persons* is implicit. Our text is a continuation of the farewell discourse in John as Jesus is saying goodbye to his disciples on the night of his betrayal. As we talked about with the Ascension, Jesus is encouraging his followers that though he must go away, they will be able to do more than he because he is sending the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, the Advocate, the One who comes alongside us to encourage us and as Jesus promises, he will “lead you into all the truth.”

If you read this section carefully, Jesus is talking about his relationship with the Father, and his relationship with the Holy Spirit. Jesus says audacious things like “All that the Father has is mine.” And the Holy Spirit “will take what is mine and declare it to you.” The Spirit will glorify Jesus.

I’ve read the beginning of this discourse in John 14 where Jesus says that “in my Father’s House are many mansions...” and “I will go and prepare a place for you so that where I am you may be also” as a future reality. I have come to believe Jesus is talking about a *present* possibility. Jesus invites us to share in the relationship he has with the Father and the Spirit now. We are invited to share in the inner community of God’s love today. Richard Rohr puts it this way,

¹ Thomas W. Gillespie, “The Lord’s Prayer” Participant’s Book (*Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding* curriculum, CMP publishing, 2010), 5.

“Full and final participation” was learned from Jesus, who clearly believed that God does not so much promise us a distant heaven but invites us into the Godself as friends and co-participants today. Remember, I am not talking about a psychological or moral wholeness in human persons, which is never the case, and why most people dismiss this doctrine—or feel incapable of it. I am talking about a divinely implanted “sharing in the divine nature,” which is called the indwelling spirit or the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:16–17). This is the foundation on which we must and can build and rebuild a civilization of life and love.

In other words, even when we have failed with all of our best attempts, even when the bottom drops out of our reality, when we are at rope’s end, *God is mysteriously present to us*. Karl Barth considered our text from Romans 5:1-5 to be the highpoint of Paul’s most important theological book.

I preached this text at *Westminster Presbyterian Church* in Gulfport, Mississippi after the 2005 Hurricane *Katrina* hit. I had never seen such destruction. It’s impossible to describe the devastation Katrina inflicted on that whole area. (1,800 people died and damages were estimated at \$125 billion). A huge swell moved inland, picked up everything, houses, cars, boats, and just carried it all back out to sea about a mile off the coast and dumped it in the ocean. All that was left was concrete slabs along coastal route 90 where mansions and apartment complexes used to stand proudly facing the water. Only the foundations were left...

Paul was writing to Christians in Rome who were experiencing tremendous loss and suffering. Persecution left them wondering if they were abandoned by God. It would be only a matter of years before the Christians would be literally thrown to the lions as circus entertainment. It’s a paradox how in the midst of some of the most difficult suffering and pain, God’s presence and peace is perfected. I don’t understand it, but I think it has to do with the work of the Spirit, and how God meets us where we are when we least expect it.

The point is that we have “access” to God’s healing presence, or peace, here in the Greek *irene*, which means healing of fragmentation, healing of ourselves, healing of our communities, healing of our moral and ethical failures, healing of the violence that too often afflicts our land. We have access through faith to the inner life of the Trinity, the divine community of love, by grace... It’s free! We are simply offered this access because God is generous and compassionate and welcomes us into the healing divine community of love...

I like what Barth says in his commentary, “By grace we have penetrated the meaning of reality. We see the paradox of existence. We see the Risen Christ in the Crucified Christ. We see the Risen Christ in the Abandoned Christ. We see the Risen Christ in the forsaken Christ.” Jürgen Moltmann takes this up in his book *The Crucified God*, because this is really important: At the cross, God experienced abandonment. The Son experienced abandonment. The Spirit experienced abandonment. The Triune God took into God’s self the suffering and pain of abandonment, and then overcame it in the resurrection. And so all who are in Christ will never be abandoned by God! There is no suffering God cannot redeem or through which God cannot bring renewal.

People talk about “taking a stand” for this or for that. We as followers of Christ are called to *stand in this grace of God*. We are called not to retaliate when we are suffering, but to *endure*. This word is one of my favorites in the Greek, *hupomone*, which means to “get under it...” Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character and character produces hope, a hope that does not disappoint because God pours love into our hearts through the Spirit.

I just want to stop there and just savor the view from that mountaintop text. As one of the guys told me from our Men’s Gathering: “Everyone’s dealing with their own ‘stuff.’” (OK he didn’t say ‘stuff,’ but you get the idea). In other words, we all will go through times of suffering and when we feel abandoned by God. But that’s precisely when we need to trust in God, to rest in Christ, and wait on the Holy Spirit. All who are *in Christ* (a phrase used over 600 times by Paul) shall never be abandoned! In suffering we need to remember our baptism “in the name of the Father, and in the Son and in the Holy Spirit.” It’s this love that flows from the Triune God, the divine fellowship of love that we need, to welcome all into the community of faith. It’s this love we need to fulfill our calling as servant leaders, as Elders and Deacons in the church and as servant leaders at home and in the larger community.

My favorite image of the Trinity is the circle dance. It comes from earlier theologians who used the term “perichoresis” to describe the Trinity. Perichoresis is made up of two words in the Greek, circle, and choreography, or dance. In other words, the relationship of the Triune God is more like a folk dance rather than a pyramid, or hierarchical structure. There is sensitivity and deference, one time one leading and another time the other leading, but always more like a joyful dance of life, rather than some static stale old doctrine!

I like the 17th century Anglican preacher Robert South who wrote about the Trinity, “As he that denies it may lose his soul; so he that too much strives to understand it may lose his wits.” So in the end, as the Spirit leads us into all truth it doesn’t necessarily require that we *understand* the mystery of that truth. My prayer is that the Spirit will lead us to *experience* that truth!

I close with an adapted poem called *Trinity*, by Raymond A. Foss:

*Multiple partners and yet one
all of them ready for me to let them take the lead
to guide my steps on the floor, on the journey
when I submit and let them lead
Dancing with the Trinity
each of them important
all in love, in relationship, needing all
to experience² the mystery that is God.*

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

² The original poem says “to begin to understand” but I’ve changed it to read “to experience,” as I confess I’ll never begin to understand it!