

## The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd

The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza

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Trinity Sunday; John 3:1-17

*May God look upon us and take delight in us; may Christ Jesus be with us always, to the end of the age; and may the Holy Spirit lead us into the dance of love that is the life of the Trinity.*

Today is Trinity Sunday: the only time in the liturgical year when we celebrate not a significant event in God's salvation story, nor a special saint of the Church, rather we celebrate a theological doctrine. My goodness, how exciting! Within clergy circles, Trinity Sunday is often known as "Seminarian Sunday" or "Curate Sunday", as this is the Sunday most frequently given to seminarians or new priests to preach. It is a form of hazing, really, because trying to explain the doctrine of the Trinity is like trying to explain string theory in theoretical physics.....it is both overly complex and, ultimately, a paradox.

In the simplest of terms, the doctrine of the Trinity is an expression of how God is known and experienced by humanity. It attempts to describe the nature of God, both within creation as well as within God's-self. Scripture contains neither the word Trinity, nor an expressly formulated doctrine of the Trinity. Rather, it "bears witness to" the wondrous and mysterious activity of a God who may best be understood in Trinitarian terms.

The doctrine of the Trinity is essential to Christianity because it reveals *the heart of God's nature* as diversity united in love. It does so by describing God as one God in three Divine Persons. The three persons are distinct, yet are one "substance, essence or nature." In this context, a "nature" is what one is, while a "person" is who one is. Three in one – three persons in one unity. Each person is distinct while also fully God. Most often, we identify this triune nature as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but over the millennia, we have used many naming constructs to represent this communion.

What makes this doctrine more than a marginally interesting mental exercise is it understands the three persons of God to be in relationship with each other. While each person of the Trinity is distinct from the others, each person is also in full communion, or "is in", the other. Jesus pointed to this nature of mutual indwelling frequently in John's gospel when he said, "I am in the Father and the Father is in me....".

Jesus also described this communion within God as bound together by endless mutual self-giving and joyful love. My personal favorite analogy for the nature of the Trinity is that of the Lover (the Father) and the Beloved (the Son), both of whom eternally pour out themselves in love to the other. And the movement of this divine Love is the Holy Spirit. Through our participation in the Body of Christ, we are the blessed recipients of the overflow of this love and can participate in this very same relationship shared by the Father and the Son, through the Holy Spirit.

But this whole notion of a trinity of persons in perfect unity sort of defies logic, doesn't it? Doubter's often derisively describe the Trinity as an example of bad math, wherein we

Christians try to say that  $1+1+1=1$ ! While this is a good joke, it isn't really accurate, because what we are really trying to say is that  $1+1+1=$  ABSOLUTE 1. In this case, absolute 1 is even greater than 1...it is the fullness and greatest expression of 1. It is the universe of 1, of which no other 1 can be equal, and most certainly not greater.

In my own life, I can imagine this diversity united in love by looking at my own family. Jonathan, Emma, and I are each distinct and quite different persons. We have different talents and viewpoints, and we function in the world in distinctive ways. But we are also united together in love. This union, our family, is a new creation in that it is somehow more than the sum of the persons. In our case,  $1+1+1 =$  a greater and fuller 1. Within our family, I am both uniquely myself but I am also in Jonathan and Emma, and they each are in me.

Well, all that being said, you probably have realized by now that there is a weakness in this analogy. As is true with all analogies, our theological constructs to describe God's divine triune nature only work so far, before they start to fall apart. The trouble, of course, comes from attempting to describe God's ineffable mystery with language that is bound and limited within creation and culture. Even more troublesome, we often get too attached to a specific analogy of the nature of God. We forget it is merely a way of describing an attribute of God but it will never reveal the totality of God. It's like the problem of the finger pointing at the moon – we tend to get distracted and look only at the finger and not the object to which it points.

The very language we use can also be problematic. Using Father-Son-Holy Spirit language is gender-specific, which not only provides a necessarily limited description but also invites all sorts of unintended emotional baggage. Another popular construct is Creator-Redeemer-Sanctifier, but while this reveals certain functions of God, it overlooks the relationships of the persons within the Trinity. Sometimes we try to avoid all of this and use entirely abstract language like, One Holy and Undivided Trinity, but this only illustrates the unity of God and not the distinct natures.

It's not that any one analogy is bad, it's just that we need to remember that they only reveal aspects of the divine Truth. This is why we need so many of them. It's sort of like how Jesus described the Kingdom of God by saying, the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, a dragnet, a pearl of great price, and so on. Do each describe an aspect of the kingdom? Yes. Does any one of them describe its totality? No.

This Trinity Sunday, let us try to hold together two essential truths about God. One, God is diversity in full communion and relationship; and, two, God is absolute unity. The challenge here is that these two truths seem to be in contradiction with each other, yet no greater truth exists within God's creation. And we should care about this because this revelation is also true for us.

In Book of Genesis, we are told that humanity is made in the image of God. While all of God's creation is beloved, we bear a unique mark upon our very being. Like a seal set into warm wax, God has impressed God's own image deep within us. This means that when we live, love, and act in certain ways, we bear God's very impression and presence in the world. To live and love in ways that are Godlike but in a human way is to live into the fullness of our humanity. If

God's essential nature is one of communion and relationship, then we are most fully who we are created to be when we, too, live in communion and relationship.

Last spring, I read a wonderful book called *The Book of Joy*, which chronicles a five-day conversation between two spiritual giants and great friends, His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, retired bishop of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa. In this book and in their individual lives and ministries, the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu are constantly reminding us that we are, in fact, one group, humanity – that while we are many, we are also one. Regardless of our desire to differentiate, categorize, separate ourselves from others, Tutu says that “we depend on the other in order for us to be fully who we are.”<sup>1</sup> He even takes it a step further by saying that “we are bound [to each other] and can be human only together.”<sup>2</sup>

This notion of our inherent interdependence – both upon God and each other – is an essential truth found in most religions and certainly is one shared by Buddhism and Christianity. Tutu emphasized that we are made for what he called *complementarity*, meaning that while we are made distinct from each other, we are also made for community, togetherness, family,<sup>3</sup> and this complementarity is a reflection of our creator. As Tutu said, “This God is community, fellowship. Being created by this God, we are created in order to flourish. And we flourish in community.”<sup>4</sup>

As God is many bound together by and in love into one unity, we too may be many bound together in love into one community, the Body of Christ. The key attributes of the Trinity are also the marks of Christian community. Like the communion that exists within God, Christian community within the Body of Christ means being in communion and relationship with each other; nurturing and sharing generative and reconciling love; and generously giving of ourselves to each other, holding nothing back. When we live in this communion and invite others to share in it, we best embody both our human and Godly natures and bear fully God's image of diversity united in love.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu, and Douglas Adams, *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World* (Penguin Random House: 2016), 57-58.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 60

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 270.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 62.