

Tracy Daub
5/27/18--University Presbyterian Church
Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17

"3 in 1 + 1"

Last week we celebrated Pentecost, recalling when the followers of Jesus received the gift of the Holy Spirit and how we modern followers are still gifted with the Spirit. The Christian calendar designates this week, today as Trinity Sunday, I suppose so we preachers can now try to make sense for our congregations as to how the Holy Spirit fits in to this extraordinary arrangement containing God the Creator and Jesus the Son. In truth, however, what we call the Trinity makes little sense. What we call the Trinity is the Christian belief that there are three entities, or sometimes referred to as three "persons", that make up the Godhead: the Creator--also called the Father, the Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

Now, people of other religions have looked at this odd belief we Christians have in the Trinity and have sometimes concluded that we Christians are polytheistic--meaning we worship more than one God. And you can see how they could arrive at that conclusion. But down through the centuries, Christian theologians have responded to such accusations, "No, no, no! We worship only one God." We believe in one God who has engaged humanity in three important ways: as Creator, as Christ, and as the Holy Spirit.

This all sounds good except it is still confusing because there are many instances of Jesus referring to God the Father or the Creator as a distinct entity from himself. And Jesus talks about the Spirit as distinct from himself. So the issue of how they could be distinct and yet all one confounds us. And truthfully, if you consulted the average Christian, I would bet that a lot of us fall into a kind of thinking, even if we don't mean to, of thinking about God in terms of there being one big God and two lesser gods.

Or sometimes, in our efforts to make sense of this thing call the Trinity, we will divide up the characteristics and attributes we believe God possesses and assign them to different persons of the Trinity: God the father is the judge, Jesus is the Savior, and the Holy Spirit is the comforter. But Christian theologians, using Scripture as a guide, have again said, "No, no, no! All the attributes and characteristics can be found in all the entities of the Trinity because they are all one."

And that brings us to the other problem of the Trinity. It is never actually mentioned in the Bible. Neither the word "trinity" nor the explicit concept of God being three in one ever appears in the Bible.

Now, before you are tempted to say, "Well this thing called the Trinity is just a bunch of hogwash! Let's toss out the whole idea!" I will say that there are reasons to defend this strange and confounding idea.

First of all, while the Trinity is not explicitly discussed in the Bible, the general concept has scriptural basis. What we do find in the Bible is talk about God as our creator. And we also find talk in the Bible about Jesus as somehow God's very presence with us. And we find talk in the Bible about the Spirit as being God's very presence with us. We see this in the reading we have from John's gospel today where Jesus has this involved conversation with Nicodemus. In this conversation, Jesus speaks about both himself and the Holy Spirit, and it is clear from what he says that he is implying that both he and the Spirit come from God, are part of God.

You may even recall how the gospel writer of John begins his entire Gospel with these words, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him." John uses this poetic term "the Word" to refer to Jesus. And it is clear that John understands Jesus to be both

with God but also in fact *God*. And that Jesus was also part of creation: "all things came into being through him." So while the Trinity is not explicitly discussed in the Bible, it is clear that early Christians understood that there was some kind of unity between God the Creator, Jesus the Christ, and the Holy Spirit. They were all one.

But how they are all one yet distinct remains a mystery. It's a mystery we can't fully understand although we will try. When trying to wrap our minds around this strange doctrine of God being three in one, I have sometimes used an analogy. It is not perfect analogy, but maybe it could help us to think about the sun--I'm speaking about the bright yellow ball in the sky that comes up each morning. The sun is an entity unto itself. Yet that fiery ball also sends out rays of light in all directions. Some of those rays of light hit the earth, giving the heat and light that are necessary for life to flourish here on earth. The sun, the rays, and the heat are all distinct entities, and yet, they are also all part of the whole. They are all one and the same. You can't have one without the others.

In the end, however, our efforts to understand the Trinity elude us. The Trinity remains a mystery. And that, I believe, is a good thing. The doctrine of the Trinity affords us Christians an important opportunity to say, "We don't know." We don't know how this thing called the Trinity works. And in a world where religious certainties have led to disastrous consequences, it is good to be forced to embrace aspects of mystery, where we simply have to say, "We don't know. We don't have the answers."

Here's the thing. We all need a personal God in our lives. We need a God who knows us, who cares about what we are facing each day of our lives, who walks with us every step of our life's journey. But this same God who is as close as your very breath, this same God who numbers the hairs on your head, this same God who Jesus called "Abba" meaning "Daddy," this

same intimate, personal God is also complex, mysterious, and elusive. This God defies our efforts to contain God, to box God into our neat formulas. This God is bigger and greater than our imaginations. Remember, Christianity is based upon the story of a God of tremendous surprises, a God who came to live among us, died a criminal's death on a cross, and whose corpse was raised three days later. The Trinity keeps us humble before God. In the face of the mystery of the Trinity, we are left without easy answers. God is not ours to possess or to know or to have all figured out.

Nevertheless, even in the face of all the mystery of the Trinity, I do believe there is at least one important message we can take from this notion of God being three in one. What we learn from the Trinity is that our God is fundamentally, at the very core of God's being, a relational God. The Creator, the Christ, the Holy Spirit are woven together in relationship with one another. What we see is at the very heart of God's nature is a God who seeks to be in relationship. At the very heart of God's nature and identity is a love that simply must be shared--within and among God's very self and with all the universe.

And this is where we humans enter into this crazy concept called the Trinity. Because at the heart of the three-in-one God is God's desire to make yet one more addition, to take three and add one more. That plus one is us. God's profound love is shared so that we might be drawn into relationship with this amazing, mysterious, and complicated God of ours. The Creator, the Christ, and the Holy Spirit all reach out with infinite love to add us into that community.

We hear the Apostle Paul speak to this in his letter to the Romans. He writes that we are not only called children of God but that we are also considered "heirs" of God. An heir is someone who inherits some share of their parent's status or condition. Paul goes on to say that we have been adopted into God's community and that we now stand before God as "joint heirs

with Christ." What Christ receives from God, so we too shall receive. That is rather amazing when you think about it. We stand as equals with Christ in what we shall inherit from God.

And what exactly do we inherit from God? The story from John's gospel gives us some clues. Jesus tells Nicodemus that what he stands to gain from letting God change his heart, from being born from above and letting the Spirit give him new birth, what he or any of us stand to gain from God is nothing short of eternal, lasting life. Of course this meant in part the life beyond this life, but it most importantly meant the life we live right now while we are alive. Eternal, lasting life can be ours NOW--because eternal life is not so much the quantity of life we might know but the quality of life we might enjoy. We stand as co-heirs with Christ to know lasting life. And this comes about from being in relationship with this complex, mysterious God of love. It comes about by letting the Spirit of God change our hearts so that we can become people who receive and share God's love. In other words, the mysterious Trinity lives in us whenever we share God's love.

If we take nothing else away from this odd concept of the Trinity, may it be the notion that the God of love desires to be in relationship with you. God is reaching out in at least three ways to draw you into God's great community of love. With the Creator, the Christ, and the Holy Spirit, it's already quite a crowd that is assembled there within the heart of God. But never fear, there is always room for one more.