

*God in Three Persons*  
from the pulpit of  
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church  
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania  
by  
the Reverend Dr. Agnes W. Norfleet

Readings: Isaiah 6:1-8  
Romans 5:1-5

May 31, 2015  
Trinity Sunday, Communion

Today is probably the least noticed High Holy Day in the Liturgical year, and my guess is that not one of you woke up this morning and said, “Oh boy, it’s Trinity Sunday!” Trinity Sunday has been called the great hinge, standing between the two halves of the liturgical year.

In the first half, from Advent and Christmas through Eastertide we focus on the life of Jesus. In the second half of the liturgical year we focus on the life of the church, the community of believers and our mission in the world. Having celebrated the Spirit giving life to the church on Pentecost last week, now the church turns from our focus on the life of Jesus to how we respond as disciples of Christ.

Trinity Sunday is the shift from one liturgical season to another, and it’s all about being the community of faith living in response to God, who is revealed to us in three persons. The 4<sup>th</sup> century theologian, St. Augustine of Hippo, had a memorable quotation about the doctrine of the Trinity. “If you

do not believe in the Trinity, you will lose your soul. If you try to understand the Trinity, you will lose your mind.”<sup>1</sup>

And a generation ago, English writer and Christian humanist, Dorothy Sayers wrote that, to the average church goer, the mystery of the Trinity means: "The Father is incomprehensible, the Son is incomprehensible, and the whole thing is incomprehensible. Something put in by theologians to make it more difficult - nothing to do with daily life or ethics." <sup>2</sup>

So... without losing our minds, and recognizing our inability to understand God fully, Trinity Sunday invites us to ponder the community within God, for the Bible reveals God in three persons, in whom there is both unity and diversity.

The Call of Isaiah acknowledges our limits to understanding God completely. God is shrouded in mystery, surrounded by seraphim, which are fiery serpents with six wings that protect the throne of God and go forth as God's ambassadors. And yet, even through this awesome, other-worldly vision, God speaks and calls a human partner to join his work in the world. Isaiah says in response to God's holiness, "Here I am, send me."

Then the Apostle Paul acknowledges this divine-human connection using Trinitarian language. In Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, we no longer need fiery, six-winged messengers to enlist us for God's service: "We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to God's grace... because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." While Paul does not lay out a theological doctrine of the Trinity for the early church, he uses this Trinitarian language to help us understand the nature of God.

We know God because God has been dramatically revealed to us: in the Old Testament by fiery vision; in the New Testament by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In Jesus, we have seen as much of God as we ever hope to see. Indeed, Paul writes, it is by the revelation of Christ and by the power

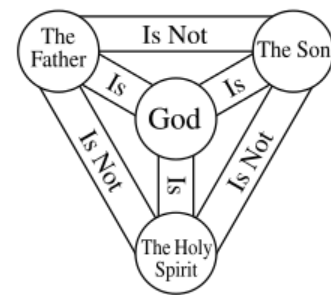
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<sup>1</sup> Augustine quote from Maetta Snyder, Westminster United Presbyterian Church, Emporia, Kansas, "Searching for the Trinity," 6/10/01.

<sup>2</sup> Dorothy Sayers quote from "Century Marks," *The Christian Century*, March 7, 2012, p. 8.

of the Holy Spirit, that we come to experience the peace, hope, and love God intends for us all. On the one hand, the doctrine of the Trinity is always a mystery. On the other, it is an invitation to the church into the communal nature of God.

Lutheran pastor and now preaching professor at Duke, Richard Lischer's book called *Open Secrets* recounts his first year of ministry in a small, rural church in the Midwest. He recalls most of the church's stained glassed windows came from a factory in St. Louis, except for their best window which came from a studio in Chicago. It was the Trinity window, high above the communion table, which dominated the front wall of the sanctuary. "Our Trinity window was a gorgeous piece of classical theology, nothing less than a diagram of God. [The graphic (right) is similar to the one depicted in the window. (Editor's note)]



At the center of the window was a triangular area in which was inscribed with the word *God*. In the area around the center were smaller triangular areas, one with the word *Father*, another with the word *Son*, and a third with *Holy Spirit*. These three were connected by three little highways running to God in the center, and on each highway was the word *IS*. Rimming the circle and connecting the three persons were more highways – between the Father and the Son, the Son and the Spirit, and so forth, and on each of these were the words *IS NOT*.

That's who God is," Lischer writes. "God IS each of these three persons, but the persons are distinct from one another... God is alone in majesty, and at the same time forever radiating love through each person of the Trinity... We are only able to love each other because the Father loves the Son through the Holy Spirit. Our window's geometric design seemed to say, "Any questions?"

Lischer then relates the window to the life of that little, rural church. "This is not an argument that would appeal to most theologians, but this is what the Trinity meant for us. ...We baptized our babies, celebrated marriages, wept over the dead, and received Holy Communion – all by the light of our best window. And we believed there was a correspondence

between the God diagrammed in that window and our own stories of friendship and neighborliness.

An aerial photographer once remarked that from the air you can see paths that crisscross pastures and fields among the farms where neighbors have trudged for generations, just to visit, or help one another in times of need. These, too are the highways among the Father, Son and Holy Spirit grooved into human relationships. The word *religion*, Lischer notes, in closing, comes from the same root as *ligaments*. These are the ties that bind.”<sup>3</sup>

The church, you see, exhibits the community that is present already in God. We love each other because God loves Christ, the Son. We nurture and empower one another for ministry because the Holy Spirit emanates from the Godhead to nurture and empower us. We serve and reach out to those in need because Jesus exhibits the love of God for the human family.

The little pathways between God – the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are models for us as we go about making grooves in the ground – where we traverse to be neighbors in communion with one another, sharing the peace of God through Christ, and the love of God poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

Dorothy Sayers had it wrong, I think: Trinity Sunday is not so much about theology as it is about ethics – it is about celebrating the relationships we traverse in mission and service as a community which professes our faith in one God – revealed to us in three persons. Today’s High Holy Day, decked out in white and complete with communion, may not be as much fun as Christmas or as astonishing as Easter, but it is nonetheless worthy of observance.

The Trinity is our model for community – ever a celebration of our unity and diversity as we travel the little highways of church life with, and for, one another.

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Lischer, *Open Secrets: A Spiritual Journey through a Country Church*, p. 80 ff.