

Sermon: Rev. Jim Friedrich | June, 4, 2023 | First Sunday after Pentecost

Imitating the Trinity in Our Common Life

Windows, south nave of León Cathedral on the Camino de Santiago.

I was walking instead of writing in May, on pilgrimage along St. Cuthbert's Way from the Scottish Borders to Holy Island in Northumbria. More on that soon. Meanwhile, I'm preaching the following for Trinity Sunday at my home parish, St. Barnabas Episcopal Church on Bainbridge Island, Washington. Some of it has appeared before on this blog, but the ending is entirely new.

Part of the fun of Trinity Sunday is getting to watch the preacher attempt to explain the most formidable mystery of Christian faith in less than 20 minutes. It can't be done! We all know that—the preacher knows it too—and the fun part is seeing how he or she is going to fail this time.

Of course, we could just say that a mystery is not meant to be explained, and leave it at that. Let's just adore the mystery, not investigate it.

But if, as the theologians insist, “the nature of the church should manifest the nature of God,”¹ then we need to know enough about the nature of God to understand how to be a church whose own way of being reflects and manifests that divine nature.

And if investigating the nature of God seems like a daunting task best left to the professionals, those who have the aptitude and training to navigate levels of complexity and nuance which would make our own heads explode, we must remember that the doctrine of the Trinity is not a math problem (How can one be three and three be one?), nor is it an abstract, highly technical construction of the metaphysical elite who spent centuries sorting out differences between Arians, Monophysites, Monothelites, Monarchians, Modalists, Ebionites and Sabellians.

Trinitarian thought isn't made of thin air or abstract speculation. It is produced and nourished by the concrete, tangible history of Christian experience. Whatever we can actually say about the Trinity is first of all grounded in experience, both the experience of our spiritual ancestors, encoded in Scripture and tradition, and the contemporary, ongoing revelations of our own communal and personal life.

Ever since the first Easter and the first Pentecost, Christians have been trying to make sense of the concrete, experiential data of salvation. Based on our collective and personal experience of being “saved” (or, if you prefer: healed, forgiven, reborn, renewed, resurrected, empowered), what can we say about the God who has done this?

Trinitarian reflection began within an ancient community deeply grounded in the monotheism of Judaism, which had, over the centuries, found ultimate reality to be not a plurality of disconnected or contradictory energies—what the ancients called “the gods”—but a coherent unity, understood to be the “one God.” However, once the early Christians began to attribute divinity to both Jesus and the Holy Spirit, a simple self-contained oneness was no longer sufficient to describe the Reality.

Without losing the unity of God, how could they account for the divine diversity revealed in the saving activities of Christ and the Spirit? Once they began to call Jesus *Kyrios* (Lord), which happened very early in their worship and their storytelling, traditional monotheism was radically destabilized. The growing perception of the Holy Spirit as a guiding and empowering presence of deity in their communities only compounded the problem.

There were various attempts to solve the problem by downgrading Jesus and Spirit to subordinate, derivative, or semi-divine realities, by no means equal to the eternal and uncreated God. Such “heresies” were popular with those who wanted to keep God simple. But “orthodoxy” was unwilling to deny the fullness of divinity to either Christ or the Spirit. For them the bottom line was this:

Only God can save us. Christ and Spirit, in the biblical revelation and Christian experience, are integral and essential to salvation. Therefore, they must be equally integral to the Holy One who is the Creator and Redeemer of all things

As a consequence, the doctrine of God became trinitarian: Three in one and one in three. In other words, God is relational. God is social. God is a communion of Persons.

If we have difficulty with “God in three Persons,” it is because we think of a person as defined by his or her separateness. I’m me and you’re you! We may interact and even form deep connections, but my identity does not depend upon you. I am a self-contained unit. You can’t live in my skin and I can’t live in yours. That’s the cultural assumption, which goes back at least as far as Descartes in the seventeenth century, and continues today in such debased forms as rampant consumerism and economic selfishness, where my needs and my desires take precedence over any wider sense of interdependence, community, or ecology.

But what we say about the Persons of the Trinity is quite different. Each Person is not an individual, separate subject who perceives the other Persons as objects. The Trinitarian persons experience one another not from the outside, but from the inside. They indwell each other in a mutual interiority.

Is this image of trinitarian indwelling difficult to conceive? Or is it something like the old John Lennon lyric?: “I am he as you are she as you are me and we are all together.” A French mystic put it this way: “it’s a case of *un ‘je’ sans moi*” (an “I” without a me). Subjectivity, yes, a distinct consciousness within my own body, particular and unique, yes; but a consciousness deeply permeated by the otherness of interdependent reality. But if the divine Persons are all inside each other, commingled, “of one being,” as the Creed says, what makes each Person distinct? To put it succinctly: the Persons are distinct because they are in relation with one another.

As Jewish theologian Martin Buber observed, we are persons because we can say “Thou” to someone else. To be a person is to experience the difference – and the connection – that forms the space between two separate subjects. My consciousness is not alone in the universe. There are other centers of consciousness: *Thou, I... Thou, I...* The fact that *you* are not *I* is what creates self-consciousness, the awareness of my own difference from what is outside myself.

If we apply this to the Trinity, we say that there are Three Persons because there is relation within God, relation between the Source who begets, the Word who is begotten, and the Spirit who binds the two together and carries them—and the love between them—outward in ever widening circles.

These relations are not occasional or accidental. They are primordial. They are eternal. There is an eternal sending within God, an eternal self-giving within God, an eternal exchange by which God is both Giver and Receiver simultaneously.

Trinitarian faith describes a God who is not solitary and alone, a God who is not an object which we can stand apart from and observe. The Trinity is an event of relationships: not three separate entities in isolation and independence from one another, but a union of subjects who are eternally interweaving and interpenetrating.

The early Church had a word for this: *perechoresis*. It means that each Person penetrates the others, each contains the other, and is contained by them. Each fills the space of the other, each is the subject, not the object of each other. As Jesus says in the Fourth Gospel: *I am in the Father and the Father is in me*.

The word *perechoresis* literally means “to dance around,” and the ancient theologians quickly seized on that image as an accessibly concrete description of a complex process. The Trinity is a dance, with Creator, Christ and Spirit in a continuous movement of giving and receiving, initiating and responding, weaving and mingling, going out and coming in. And while our attention may focus at times on a particular dancer, we must never lose sight of the larger choreography to which each dancer belongs: the eternal *perichoresis* of Three in One, One in Three.

Wallace Stevens made a poem about the process of giving ourselves over to a larger whole. He calls it “the intensest rendezvous,” where we find ourselves drawn out of isolation “into one thing.” He wasn’t writing about the Trinity, but his words come as close as any to describing the essential dynamic of the divine Persons:

Here, now, we forget each other and ourselves.

We feel the obscurity of an order, a whole,

A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous.^[ii]

This divine relationality is not something which an originally solitary God decided to take up at some point. God is eternally relational. Before there was an external creation to relate to, God’s own essential self was and is an event of perpetual relation. There was never simply *being*, but always *being-with*, *being-for*, *being-in*. To be and to be in relation are eternally identical.

When the Bible says, “God is love” (I John 4:16), it means that love is not just something God has or something God does; love is what God *is*. As Orthodox theologian John D. Zizoulas says in his influential text, *Being as Communion*, “Love as God’s mode of existence ... constitutes [divine] being.”^[iii] Feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson echoes this when she says, “being in communion constitutes God’s very essence.”^[iv]

In other words, God is Love giving itself away—self-emptying, self-diffusing, self-surrendering—and in so doing finds itself, receives itself, becomes itself.

For those of us made in God’s image, who God is matters deeply, both for our own self-understanding and for our engagement with the world. The Trinity isn’t just a doctrine or an idea. It’s a practice, a way of life, the shape of every story, the deep structure of the church, and indeed of all reality.

The mystics can help us out here. Early in the twelfth century, a German monk named Rupert of Deutz went into a church where mass was being said by a white-haired bishop. At the offertory procession he experienced a vision of the Holy Trinity:

“On the right at the edge of the altar stood three persons of such revered bearing and dignity that no tongue could describe them. Two were quite old, that is, with very white hair; the third was a beautiful youth of royal dignity ...”^[v]

A century later, Hadewijch of Antwerp, one of those remarkable women mystics who flourished in the late Middle Ages, also had a vision of the Trinity. But instead of three white males, what she saw was a dark whirlpool, which she described as “divine fruition in its hidden storms.” Hovering over this whirlpool was a spinning disc, on which sat a figure wearing the countenance of God – the face of God – on whose breast were written the words, “The Most Loved of All Beloveds.”

We may find Hadewijch’s vision more congenial: it is genderless, and less crudely specific than Rupert’s. And the tempestuous whirlpool, a flood of energy ceaselessly flowing through the universe, conveys a dynamic

image of divinity that resembles the postmodern cosmologies of process theology and quantum physics. It's probably easier for most of us to believe in a divine whirlpool than in three white guys.

But the crucial difference between Rupert and Hadewijch is not in the relative resonance of their imagery, but rather in what happens next. Rupert remains an observer, one who stands apart and sees God as an object. But Hadewijch does not remain separate from what she sees:

“Then I saw myself received in union by the One who sat there in the whirlpool upon the circling disc, and there I became one with him in the certainty of union... In that depth I saw myself swallowed up. Then I received the certainty of being received, in this form, in my Beloved, and my Beloved also in me.” Rupert’s knowledge of God remained conceptual. Hadewijch’s knowledge of God became experiential. She was gathered into the circulating current of divinity. She became part of its flow, and that divine flow became part of her.

The language she uses for this experience is not mathematical or philosophical. Her language is the language of the heart. She describes being “swallowed up... in my Beloved, and my Beloved also in me.” Love, she discovered, is the way the soul knows. Love is the way the soul sees.^[vi]

And what Love knows, what Love sees, is this: God is not a simple, static substance but an *event of relationships*. That’s why we say that God is love. “To be” has no ontological reality apart from “to be in relationship.” In the words of Anglican priest John Mbiti of Kenya, expressing the strongly communal mindset of African theology, “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.”^[vii]

Each Person contains the others and is contained by them in a shared communion of self-offering and self-surrender. But that continuous self-offering is never a one-way transaction, either one of self-emptying or one of being filled. It is always both at once – giving *and* receiving – as we ourselves know from our own mutual experience of love at its best.

As Jesus said, “losing” yourself and “finding” yourself are equivalent and simultaneous. In giving ourselves away, we receive ourselves back. This may be counterintuitive to the modernist mindset of autonomous individual self-possession, but it is the essence of communion: “a giving of oneself that can only come from the ongoing and endless reception of the other.”^[viii]

As God’s friends, we are not merely observers of this divine life of self-offering and self-surrender. We are participants.

If God is communion, the eternal exchange of mutual giving and receiving, then the Church must live a life of communion as well. When Love’s *perichoresis* becomes our way of being in the world—as believers, as church—the Trinity is no longer just doctrine or idea. It is a practice, begetting justice, peace, joy, kindness, compassion, reconciliation, holiness, humility, wisdom, healing and countless other gifts. As theologian Miroslav Volf has said, “The Trinity is our social program.”^[ix]

The Church exists to participate in the life of God, and to enable others to do the same. We exist to make divine communion not just an inner experience but a public truth. We don’t just *feel* God’s *perichoresis*. We don’t just *feel* Love’s eternal dance. We embody it. We live it. We show it. We share it.

Church isn’t something we decide to do—or not do—on a Sunday, when we’re not otherwise occupied. It’s not a consumer item, just one of many options competing for our individual time and attention. Nor is it like a fire hose safely stored in a glass case, for emergency use only. And it is certainly not an antiquarian society preserving quaint rituals, or a museum to display our nostalgia for a lost past.

No! The Church is the society of God’s friends—resurrection people, animated by divine breath—striving to imitate the triune communion of divine life in our human life together. By showing up, by committing to the shared vocation of worshipping, witnessing and serving together, by tending the holy flame of faith in a

heedless world, we offer ourselves, our souls and bodies, as vessels of that communion—not only in our sacramental life, but wherever we happen to live and move and have our being.

Is that too hard for us? Are we up to it? My friend Bob Franke once wrote a song about the various ways he showed love for his daughter when she was a little girl. He didn't do it perfectly, of course. No one does. But he gave it everything he had. And a line from that song, I think, speaks to our own calling as a community of faith to imitate the divine communion of the Trinity in our common life, to practice trinitarian love on earth as it is in heaven:

It may not be the thing we do best, but it's the best thing that we do.^[x]

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with us all, now and forever. Amen.

^[i] Catherine LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and the Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991), 403.

^[ii] Wallace Stevens, "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," *Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997), 444.

^[iii] John D. Zizoulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993), 46.

^[iv] Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (NY: Crossroad, 1993), 227.

^[v] Bernard McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism: Gregory the Great Through the 12th Century* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994), 330.

^[vi] *ibid.*, *The Flowering of Mysticism* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), 212-16.

^[vii] q. in Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *The Trinity: Global Perspectives* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 352.

^[viii] Graham Ward, "The Schizoid Christ," in *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader*, ed. John Milbank and Simon Oliver (NY: Routledge, 2009), 241.

^[ix] Miroslav Volf, "'The Trinity is Our Social Program': The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement," *Modern Theology* 14, no. 3 (July 1998).

^[x] Adapted from Bob Franke, "Boomerang Pancakes," on *For Real* (1986). The original line is in the first person singular.