

## ***Living in the Trinity***

John 16:12-15

June 3, 2007

### **I.**

Today's gospel gives us a glimpse of God in all three persons, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The church refers to God in this way as the Holy Trinity. And as we see from the service bulletin, today is Trinity Sunday. It is a time when we think about how this view of God as three persons constitutes the source of our common life in the church and the foundation of our faith.

Much of our liturgy and worship involves the Trinity in one way or another. For example, the Nicene Creed, which we will say together after this sermon, defines how we view God, and is divided into three parts. There is one each for the Father, for Jesus Christ the Son, and for the Holy Spirit. So today I would like to talk about the Trinity, and this idea of how three divine persons can exist as one God.

And here I am reminded of the fellow who went to church just once a year. It wasn't on Christmas, and it wasn't on Easter, but on Trinity Sunday. He said he really enjoyed seeing the preacher get so confused trying to explain the Trinity.

Hopefully I won't have that problem, so let's begin. We know God exists as three persons in one being, but here the math is tricky. The simple part is you don't have to go higher than three. The complicated part goes beyond usual rules because one plus one plus one still equals one.

This means that we have to adjust our minds a little and be prepared to think outside the box. In some ways the Trinity is a mystery that has not been fully revealed to us, and in other ways we must begin by setting aside our worldly understandings of ideas such as what we mean by "time," and what we mean by "person."

First, let's consider time. There are at least two ways to do that. One is when we think of eternity, we can envision our time stretching out endlessly before us as series of moments that will never end. That is eternity into the future. And there also is eternity in the past. It goes the other way as well. We could treat eternity past as a series of moments that stretches endlessly back forever where eternity always has existed and has no beginning as we understand it.

But this view treats time as always existing. Another way is to treat time as something God created in creation. This would mean that eternity is timeless rather than being a series of measurable moments that have no beginning or end.

In either event it is important because for us, God always has existed. There never was a beginning. God exists from eternity past outside of time and space even though God also enters our own time and space to relate to us in our own history.

The other notion to consider is that of a person. We tend to think of persons as separate individuals with separate bodies and centers of consciousness. Each person is unique, and if there are three people in a room, then there are three separate people in the room. They do not exist together as one person.

It is different, however, with God as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who are three separate and distinct, but yet completely interrelated, forms of existence. All three share the same single substance or essence as one Godhead, even though they also are three separate divine beings. This might be hard to grasp with our laws of physics that say two (or three) objects cannot occupy the same space at the same time. But we have already established that the Trinity exists outside of time and space where earthly rules do not apply.

## II.

Now, at this point, it is helpful to understand the Trinity in two ways. One is how the Trinity exists beyond time and space, "out there," and the other is how the Trinity is present in the world "down here."

Although there is only one Trinity, the Trinity "out there" refers to the basic nature of the three divine persons and how they relate to each other, entirely apart from humanity. That relationship existed even before the creation of the universe, and is the same now as it was then. We can call that the "internal Trinity," although theologians use Latin words and other more technical descriptions.

On the other hand, the Trinity "down here" describes how the Trinity, through the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, relates to us, in our lives, and in the history of humanity. We can call this the "external Trinity," although again theologians use Latin words and more technical terms.

The importance of this distinction is that when considering what the Trinity *is*, we usually envision the internal Trinity "out there," apart from humanity and the world. But when we consider what the Trinity *does*, the focus can shift to the external Trinity "down here," and how God in three persons affects our lives in ways that we experience.

## III.

Today I want to talk about the internal Trinity; what the Trinity is. And we might begin by understanding what the Trinity is not. A point of departure could be to ask if there a hierarchy within the Trinity. Is the Father like the rector, the Son like the assistant rector, and the Holy Spirit like the parish administrator? Absolutely not. The Son is not the Father's assistant, and the Holy Spirit is not beneath either the Father or the Son.

No one is the boss or the CEO, so to speak, and in terms of the way they exist "out there," among themselves, no one has any priority over the other. They all are coequal, none is subordinate to the other, and they give and receive their divine love to each other equally.

Now, even though we realize that "down here" with us the three divine persons might do different things and relate to us in our faith and worship in different ways, they still are all equal. In this sense the Trinity "out there" is the same as the Trinity "down here."

Continuing on with what the Trinity is not, we also can ask where the Son and Holy Spirit came from. Did the Father exist first, then the Son, and then the Holy Spirit? Again, absolutely not.

Just as there was never a time (or aspect of timelessness) when the Father did not exist, there also was never a possibility that the Son and Holy Spirit did not always exist. They all are coeternal and always have existed. Again, this is counterintuitive in terms of how we look at the world, but if we think about it the reason becomes apparent. If the Son and Holy Spirit were created beings then they could not be God. God was not created in any way, and God does not change. This means that God in three persons always has been God in three persons.

Finally, there are two additional opposite but equal errors to be avoided. First, there is not just one being we call God who wears three different hats at different times. This was an early heresy in the church. God does not act at different times as the Father as creator, as the Son as redeemer, and as the Holy Spirit as sanctifier. The Father always is the Father, the Son always is the Son, and the Holy Spirit always is the Holy Spirit.

Conversely, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not entirely separate individuals like we are separate individuals. It is wrong to ignore the single being of God and focus on the three divine

persons as being independent and not united with each other. This was another early heresy at the other end of the spectrum, and was equally misleading.

So, having considered what the Trinity is not, we can more easily perceive what the Trinity is. And even so, it's important to understand that the nature of God still is surrounded by mystery. It is not a matter of *comprehending* God, which we cannot do, but rather a matter of *apprehending* God, which is within our grasp.

Against that background, we can understand the Trinity as having three essential attributes as the Trinity exists "out there," as the internal Trinity. First, there is one God, consisting of three fully and equally divine persons, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Second, these persons are coeternal, and have existed throughout eternity past. They have no beginning as we understand that idea, and none was created by the other. This means, for example, that Jesus Christ, the earthly Son of God, became incarnate from the eternal heavenly Son that always has existed.

Third, and this is the most difficult idea to grasp, they share one substance or essence as one God, and yet are separate beings while remaining undivided. They mutually indwell each other and are bound together by mutual love. It is the ultimate reciprocity where each contains the other two, and each penetrates and surrounds the other two while at the same time being penetrated and surrounded by the other two. I know this sounds a little metaphysical, but I don't know a better way to say it.

#### IV.

Now, at this point you might ask, "where am I getting all of this? Is it in the Bible?" The answer is that the foundations of the doctrine are indeed in the Bible. For example, in the Old Testament God revealed himself in the plural. In the Book of Genesis God said "let *us* make people in *our* image." (1:26). And the Prophet Isaiah heard the voice of the Lord saying "whom shall I send, and who will go for *us*?" (6:8). There are many other examples.

Specific references to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit also appear throughout Scripture, and in some cases, in a single passage or sentence. In Matthew Jesus charged the disciples to baptize "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." (28:19). Peter welcomed believers as "destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ." (1 Pe. 1:2). Again, there are other examples. Today's reading from John refers to all three of the divine persons.

With this biblical background, it was left to the early Church Fathers to interpret Scripture and to formulate the doctrine of the coeternal and undivided Trinity of three persons in one being as we have it today. For the most part that work was complete by the end of the fifth century.

The famous church Council of Nicea, for example, which produced our Trinitarian Nicene Creed, occurred in 325 A.D. St. Augustine finished his fifteen volume work on the Trinity in 416 A.D. Other theologians contributed over the centuries, but the doctrine was clarified very early.

#### V.

But what does all this mean for us today? Why is it important to understand what the Trinity is? Why not just focus what the Trinity does, and as Christians just simply recognize that God is made known to us through Jesus Christ as mediated by the Holy Spirit? Why do we want to understand ideas of eternity, and coequality, and the mystery of how the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit exist together as one God?

Well, it certainly is part of our Christian life to place Christ at the center of our prayers and worship. But there is another aspect as well. It goes to the essence of God, which is love, and how we as believers can truly know that love.

When we consider the mutual indwelling of the three persons of the Trinity in each other, we can understand that the relationship is one of eternal communion among them, and is grounded in love that overflows in abundance into creation and our lives. By virtue of this eternal love they dwell in one another to such an extent that they are one, and yet they are three. This eternal communion of their being has been referred to as the "divine dance."

And we are invited join that divine dance, to participate in that love with them in their eternal divine life. All we have to do is accept that invitation through our prayers and our lives. The God "out there" communicates to us "down here" through the unity of the Trinity, and it is a unity that is open and waiting for us.

## **VI.**

So we see that the Holy Trinity is not a unity of one, but rather a unity of three in one. And that unity is expressed in eternal love that abounds among them and extends to us. It is our invitation to participate in that divine life by accepting through faith how we can be transformed by the power of this Trinitarian love.

And when we do that, when we participate in the divine unity within the community of faith right here at St. Thomas, we can fulfill God's purpose of earthly unity as a model for Christian living, and we can truly share the blessings and wonderful gifts that we have been given. *Amen.*