

Last Sunday was Pentecost, 50 days after Easter. We spoke of a powerful coming of the Holy Spirit, in wind and fire. So this is now the season of the Holy Spirit, how the early disciples were empowered by Divine Spirit to heal and teach and preach. And this Sunday is often called Trinity Sunday, to describe how God comes to our world in different ways: as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.... Creator, Redeemer, and Indwelling Spirit, also called Counselor, Sustainer, and more.

So what is Trinity? It is the name of many churches, for one thing! ...like one of the most famous churches in Cambridge. And also in Washington D.C.? There is something important about that evolving doctrine, but also something very much of a mystery, inexplicable.

The mystery is that God is Three in One (We sing: "God in three persons, blessed Trinity!") Of course it is an oversimplification, but two simple illustrations at least make the point: Water is an example; water can exist as ice, as liquid water, and as steam! The great St. Augustine mentioned the example of wood; the root of a tree is wood, the trunk of a tree is wood, and the branches of a tree are wood. One essence, with different parts or different functions. The example of a tree seems to be a close analogy: The roots could be like God the Creator, the Source of all life. The trunk could be like Jesus, the most visible and fullest expression of God, and the branches could be more like the Holy Spirit, reaching out into all the world and planting little seeds everywhere.

If this is all too complex, confusing, know that you are not alone. Pastors and theologians have debated doctrines of Trinity for centuries. In fact it is often a key question that congregations use when interviewing prospective pastors; it was indeed here at

Bellville! And I still remember what I said, something like: “Well, the Trinity is impossible to pin down logically. If I had to say anything approaching rational certainty, I would say that I believe at least in a Binary God, a Two in One.” That means something like Transcendent and also Immanent... a Spirit Beyond, but also Spirit that comes into flesh. God the Creator but also God incarnate, born in Jesus. I guess that makes me a “binitarian!” A doctrinal danger in describing God in Two essences may be that I was conflating or merging God the Creator and God the mystery of Holy Spirit. But Belleville, nor the UCC, never was orthodox in doctrine, so they invited me to be pastor here.

Well, let me mention something perhaps more important than trying to explain a mystery of One God in Three persons. I think perhaps the most important aspect of the “three persons” is that God, the Divine Spirit, is essentially **relational**. The Divine Spirit has fluidity, is reaching out like branches. Yet the Spirit also has depth, roots, going down to deep and quiet sources. It makes sense that the simplest definition in the Bible for God is that God is Love. The spirit of Love is relational; “Love isn’t Love until you give it away!”

In Trinitarian terms, GOD so loved the world...that he entered the world in Jesus to walk with and guide and heal us. JESUS so loved the world that he emptied himself, gave up glory, served all, as in washing the disciples feet. The HOLY SPIRIT, so loved the world, after Jesus ascended, as indwelling presence, guiding us into all truth. It is all active love, starting with deep roots at the source of God, becoming incarnate to walk with, even suffer with humans, and a love finally able to indwell our minds and hearts to heal, sustain, and guide us.

Jon Paul Sydnor was co-pastor of the church my parents chose in Walpole, MA, and is now professor of theology at Emmanuel College. He has delved deeply into the relationally of God, and wrote a book entitled *The Open **Dance***. Like most theology books, there are many many fancy words, with very subtle nuances, to describe a fairly simple reality! I have read excerpts of his book that he puts out on substack, and I'll try a short, simple summary of his main thesis: "We humans are built for relationship, to be in a continual dance of energy with others, especially with love and respect." Jon Paul is married to Abbey, they have 3 children, and as co-pastors, Abbey was the main preacher, while Jon Paul was the academic and theologian. You know in that kind of busy household, they needed to show plenty of love as respect, respect for the individuality of all, while still being one family.

Jon Paul told me once that in his theology classes, when teaching about the doctrine of the Trinity, he would use my parents' marriage as an illustration of how there can be 3 in 1, or how a good marriage can illustrate this in a simpler form: how 2 can be 1. There is an individuality of course, but there is also a Oneness. While there are distinct interests and activities, in so many ways you sense that they operate as One. When we see this paradox in human lives, it can make sense to us to see God as Trinitarian: distinct manifestations of Spirit, yet all relating in Oneness with each other.

One commentator approached the mystery of God as Trinity in a very wise or clever way. He asked... what if there were only **God**?... some more distant Creator spirit, where is the connection with *us*? What if there were only **Jesus** as God? Where would be the Creative aspect of Spirit? The Creative

energy? Where would be the universal aspect of God for those who never heard of Jesus or read of him? What if there were just the idea of indwelling **Holy Spirit**? Where would be all the great teachings of Jesus? Where would be the Creative energy in God and in us? If there were only God *inside* of us, we might get a very swell head, or think everything we do and think is divine! We might need a little correction and direction from the God of the Jews and the Christ or Messiah of the Christian scripture.

I probably have said before that I was often wary of too much emphasis on Jesus and worship of Jesus. Yes, still, if Jesus is the only thing people talk about.. and I've called it the "idolatry of the 2nd person of the Trinity." (A Christianity that is extreme, and exclusive against those who don't talk about Jesus). But I also have come to realize that just talking about God or Spirit can get nebulous, our thoughts can go all over the place, and that seeing Jesus as Messiah, as Great Teacher, as Lord in our lives, as center of our faith, can keep us grounded, more focused, UCC often saying "the love and justice of Jesus."

A trinitarian view can keep us balanced, in our many ways of viewing and connecting with God... as **transcendent** mystery of love, and also as **immanent**, incarnational presence (oops, I just said that in a "binitarian" way!). Let's keep connecting to God in many ways, and keep growing in that great commandment of Jesus: to love as I have loved you. Amen.