

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner  
Trinity Sunday – June 7, 2009  
Psalm 29, John 3:1-9, Romans 8:12-17

God as Three-In-One: How Can These Things Be?

“How can these things be?” That was the question that Nicodemus asked Jesus after Jesus spoke of the necessity of being born from above. “How can these things be?” And that was also my question that formed on my lips as I realized that today was Trinity Sunday. “Oh, how can these things be?”

As many of you know, we had such a fantastic Sunday last week on Pentecost. The music was outstanding. You all were full of energy and Spirit. As a church member wrote on her Facebook page: “The Frozen Chosen were boogying down at Woodhaven today on Pentecost.” And then... Monday came around and I realized today was Trinity Sunday, a Sunday centered on a pondering a theological doctrine. “O Lord,” I whined, “how can this be?” For when you compare this Sunday’s observance of Trinity Sunday to last Sunday’s celebration of Pentecost, well, it has the potential to leave you a bit cold, if not more than a bit confused. Just listen again to the words I used: The **observance** of Trinity Sunday as opposed to the **celebration** of Pentecost. And I know I am not the only one who makes that kind of delineation. Some of you with whom I spoke this week made similar remarks.

But I must wonder, what might it say about us that we have an obvious lack of excitement over pondering the nature of our triune God? Furthermore, might that the problem in the first place – the fact that **we** want to keep being the subject of the sentence? Maybe one of the most profound gifts of the Trinity is that we actually have nothing to do with it at all.

But before we continue to contemplate the Great Mystery we call our triune God, let us remind ourselves how these things have come to be – how we inherited our deeply faithful, yet still fallible, attempt to speak of the One who is beyond our speech. First, we need to remember that this doctrine, this teaching, of the Trinity is not defined in Scripture.

By that I mean we do not have any record of Jesus explaining how the Trinity works, nor do we find in the Bible the exact language of the doctrinal formula found in our creeds. Actually, the doctrine, the teaching, of the Trinity emerged out of the questions raised at the intersection of life and Scripture itself. Questions like: If God is one, how do we experience God as three—Father, Son and Spirit? Why does one God need three names? How can God be three in one?

And unfortunately, or perhaps by design, the Bible only confuses the issue. Scripture often speaks of the three in very distinct terms, making it seem like they operate independently. Just look at our Scriptures for today. In Psalm 29, we hear about God as the Creating Sovereign, the person of God known traditionally as the Father, the one above all and in charge. The One whose voice thunders over the waters and flashes forth

flames of fire. The One who causes the oaks to whirl and strips the forest bare. God the Mighty and Awe-Inspiring Creator, Father, Source.

And then in our Romans passage, we learn about another part of God—one whom we did indeed celebrate last Sunday—the Person known as the Spirit of God, who bears witness in our spirits and helps us to cry out, “Abba! Father!” The One who makes us heirs of God, with Christ.

And to further complicate things, in our John passage, we overhear Jesus speaking with Nicodemus about this person of Spirit, capital S, through whom we are born from above. And how the Spirit is like the wind, blowing where it chooses. And if Julie had read through verses 16 and 17, we would have also heard Jesus make the central Christological claim of our faith: “For God so loved the world that God gave the only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

So when you look at all three biblical passages chosen for this Sunday, passages that are typical of those found throughout our Scripture, it now appears there are three persons involved in this God thing. And yet, we still claim God as One. Indeed, we insist that God is One.

Are you confused yet? Do you find yourself standing with Nicodemus, frustrated and scratching your head and saying “How can these things be?” Don’t be embarrassed if you are! It is confusing. Who are all these people? If God is One, how can God the Creator be God as Spirit at the same time? How can God the Father be God’s own Son? And, if Jesus is God, to whom does he pray all those times? And what is this Holy Spirit? Is it the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Jesus, or something else altogether? How are all these people one, yet distinct; indivisible, yet separate? O Lord, how can these things be?

It is very confusing. And that intellectual and emotional confusion is why church councils took centuries debating and discussing these questions. And the church councils came up with some wonderful orthodox statements, some of which you can find in the Nicene Creed, located at the beginning of our hymnal. However, as much as I intellectually understand what the councils were striving to do, and as much as I appreciate their approach, their answers never quite do it for me. I see their reasoning, but I never completely comprehend their final result. And so we are left with the very important questions: When all is said and done, why should we care? Why is it so important to proclaim God as the triune God, God in three persons, blessed Trinity?

The language of the Trinity is important because above all, as Christians, our language of the Trinity is our particular Christian way of speaking our experience of God. It is our best attempt to give words to our faith, our best attempt to speak of the One beyond our speech. The doctrine, teaching, of the Trinity is our theological shorthand of saying what we believe, our distinctly Christian vocabulary. Without it, nothing makes much sense.

Without it, we do not have the words to describe how God is above us, within us, around us. Without it, we cannot speak of Incarnation, of God becoming Flesh, one-with-us.

This understanding of God as “three in one” is how we can claim that we believe the God of creation, the Logos who existed before the beginning, is the same one who cried out in a manger and grew up as one of us. It is our best way to express that the God we know as the Spirit who binds us together as one body, is the same One who overturned tables out of anger and who sat children on his knee out of love. Our understanding of God as three-in-one is our best way to express that the God who has experienced death first-hand as Jesus, is the same God who experienced grief first-hand as the Father.

So yes, our words are frail, they are confusing, and they are fallible because they come from us. But our doctrine of the Trinity, our proclamation of God as “Three in One”, is our best way of trying to describe the portrait painted of God that we see in Scripture. And it is also our attempt to describe how we experience God in our own lives. For we have a lot in common with the writers of Scripture. Like those inspired authors, we also know that we experience God differently from day to day, from moment to moment.

Sometimes we see God as a distant presence, not too close, one who causes oaks to whirls and strips the forest bare. At other times God appears in the faces of those who sit beside us in church, reminding us we are not alone. One day God is our shepherd, gently leading us along our way. Then on another day, God feels more like the wild breeze; we don't know where it came from and where it is going, but we know it blew away all of our certainties and routines.

At one moment, God is the nurturing father, gathering up his robes and running to welcome us home. And in the next moment, God is the strong mother, teaching us to walk and to stand tall. God as the rock. God as shelter. God as Spirit within. God as the stranger. God as friend. We experience God in so many different ways. **And yet, and this is very important – even though we experience God in different and particular ways, we know that it is the same God we meet each time.** As Christians, we do not worship a hidden God—rather, we worship a revealed God—one who has decided to make God's self known. And our Trinitarian words are our best way to try and reflect the One who has been made known to us.

The doctrine of the Trinity, the proclamation of God as “three in one”, is our very human and fallible attempt to get our minds around the Great Mystery we know as God. It is our way of giving speech to the One who is beyond our speech. But we do it knowing full well that even as we make our proclamation, even as we step out in faith and affirm that we believe in a triune God, we do it as we stand with Nicodemus, scratching our heads and saying, “Now, how can these things be?”

Because the truth is that all we can really ever do is skate around the edges of the mystery, hoping that in some way, we are getting a piece of it right. So yes, it is strange to have a Sunday focused on a theological doctrine. And yes, the doctrine itself raises more questions than offers answers. But perhaps we ought to use Pentecost language for

THIS Sunday too. Perhaps, instead of this Sunday being an **observance** of Trinity Sunday, I should have put on the bulletin – the **celebration** of Trinity Sunday.

Because one gift this Sunday offers is the gift of getting ourselves out of the subject line. The reality is that we have absolutely nothing to do with how God is God. We have absolutely no role in determining how God goes about the business of living up to God's job description.

And isn't that wonderful! Doesn't that just free you up? Because we do not have to figure it out. Rather, instead of being so focused on explanation and answers, we can simply celebrate the fact that God always remains one step ahead of us. God always remains just out of our reach of comprehension. God refuses to let us flatten the triune mystery into a formula that adds up and makes sense to us fallible, finite creatures.

You have heard me quote this saying from Emily Dickinson before, but please allow me to speak her words again. She writes, "Tell all the truth, but tell it at slant." For me, that is what our triune God does in both Scripture and in our lives.

God is always telling us the truth about who God is—that God is a God of mysterious freedom, of loving judgment, of gracious welcome, of merciful embrace. And yet, God always reveals God's self at slant—shrouded just enough so that we do not get confused and think that we are God ourselves; shrouded just enough so that we often find ourselves scratching our heads in wonder and amusement asking, "How can these things be?"

And so, on this **celebration** of Trinity Sunday, as well as on every day, let us keep trying to speak of this mysterious God of ours known as the blessed Trinity. But may our worlds always be broad enough, wide enough, that we don't get too tongue-tied with logic, trying to get God all figured out and fully defined. For our triune God is too full of imagination, movement, and mystery to ever be completely captured by our human words and our faithful but fallible doctrines. Thanks be to God!