

Trinity Sunday: The Diversity of God

Romans 5:1-5

June 12, 2022

Sermon by Rev. Cynthia Cochran-Carney at First Presbyterian Church of San Rafael, CA

*Since we have been made right with God by our faith, we have peace with **God**. This happened through **Jesus Christ**, who has brought us into that blessing of God's grace that we now enjoy. And we are happy because of the hope we have of sharing God's glory. We also have joy with our troubles, because we know that these troubles produce patience. And patience produces character, and character produces hope. And this hope will never disappoint us, because God has poured out this love to fill our hearts. He gave us love through the Holy Spirit, that has been given to us.*

Romans 5:1-5 The Message

Peace with the Great Spirit

*This good standing we have brings peace with the **Great Spirit**. This peace comes from trusting in **Creator Sets Free (Jesus) the Chosen One** and what he has done for us. Our trust in him opens the way into the Creator's great kindness and is now the solid ground on which we stand. Now our boasting is in him, as we look forward to being the kind of people the Great Spirit created us to be, a people filled with his beauty and shining-greatness.*

*But we must also find joy in our sufferings on his behalf. For we know that when the trail gets rough, we must walk with firm steps to reach the end. As we walk firmly in his footprints, we gain the strength of spirit that we need to stay true to the path. This gives us the hope we need to reach the end of the trail with honor. All of this is because of Creator's great love that has been poured into our hearts by the **Holy Spirit** who is a gift to us from above.*

Romans 5:1-5 First Nations Versions

Today is Trinity Sunday. The Trinity in traditional language in the Christian church has been Father, Son and Holy Spirit, 3 aspects of the Holy One. The word does not appear in the Bible.

Let's name some obvious aspects of our spiritual lives - God is a mystery. God is Holy. God is beyond our comprehension. And considering the Trinity, the triune nature of God is more mysterious still.

One of my disciplines is to read at least two translations of biblical texts. Our passage from Romans invites us to spread our theological thinking in different ways. Compare The Message and First Nations translations in the words and images of the Holy One. How love comes to us and fill us in the midst of challenges and the rough trail that is life. It matters which words we use and the images that shape us.

For some the Trinitarian language of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is foundational and irreplaceable. For some they are literal and not metaphors. 3 in one. Actually, Trinity is an

attempt by Christians to understand how God is ONE and yet experience in 3 ways. You hear Trinitarian formula in many traditional hymns and prayers. I tend to use other Trinitarian language - Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. Trinitarian language is grounded in Scripture. II Corinthians 13:13 is a blessing/benediction some pastors use - "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you." Jesus commanded His followers to baptize disciples "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). Not 3 separate gods. Not one more important than the other two.

How does is this Trinitarian belief and theology expressed?

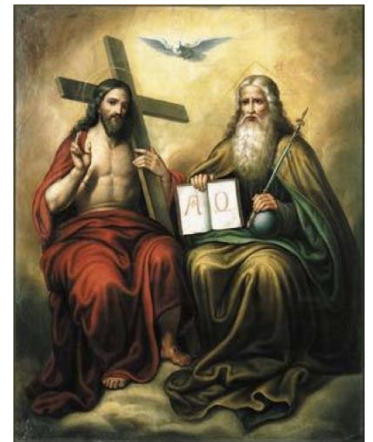
In churches, we often look for language that helps children and adults grasp it. The Trinity is like water 3 forms ... Liquid, ice/solid, steam. Okay, but not complete. The Trinity is like an apple – seeds, fruit, skin.... Maybe

Humor – 3 in one body wash..... I don't think so.

There have been historical examples. St. Patrick offered the shamrock – one plant, 3 leaves, all connected.

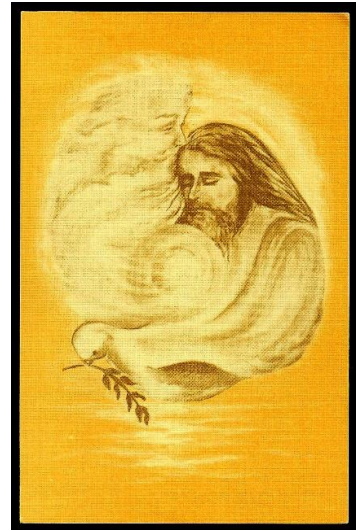
How have artists expressed the Trinity?

Here is an image of the three persons of the Trinity. Father, Son, Holy Spirit, as played by two white men and a bird. Jesus is the one with the cross, if you were wondering.



This next image is a famous 14th century icon by Andrei Rublev. This comes from Abraham's experience in Genesis. He encounters three visitors and provides them with hospitality. Because of his hospitality, they pronounce a blessing—that Abraham's wife Sarah will bear a child in their old age. From the earliest days of the church's wrestling with this concept of Trinity, they have looked back at this text, of the three holy visitors, bringing blessing to Abraham.

This next slide is contemporary. I like the simplicity of it. And the circular movement. This picture captures the reality that there are not clear boundaries between the three persons of the Trinity.



And the final image is of a Celtic Trinity knot. Similar to the previous picture, the Celtic knot is one, unbroken line connecting the three, with no beginning and no ending. This trinity is surrounded by a circle, symbol of divine eternity. (1)

We don't have Trinity Sunday so you can adhere to correct doctrine. The Trinity matters because it is the theological grammar by which we understand the God of scripture. But shorthand can also limit us. Diversity of language and metaphors can deepen our experience of the Holy One. Our images of God become more fluid as we grow in spiritual maturity:

God comes to each of us in unique ways throughout our lives. For some people, it may be good if God comes as a Father, but sometimes God must come as a friend and other times as a lover. Yet as we continue on our spiritual journeys, sometimes God is revealed and experienced in feminine form. Perhaps it will be through Sophia infusing us with wisdom. The Spirit as feminine presence. God as Mother who labors and gives birth to creation.

We have to break through our ideas about God to find out who God really is. Our early and spontaneous images of God are typically a mixture of our experiences with our own mothers and fathers. If our mother was harshly critical, so is our God. If our father was domineering or authoritative, likewise our God. It's almost tragic to witness how many people are afraid of God, experience God as cold and absent, and even have a sense of God as someone who might hurt and betray them or punish them. These ideas about God reveal far more about relationships with parental figures than they do about our Trinitarian God.

Richard Rohr expresses this well.

Many of us, consciously or unconsciously, have pictured God and reality as a pyramid-shaped universe. We placed a male God at the top of the triangle and everything else beneath. Most Christian art, church design, and architecture reflects this pyramidal worldview. Humanity's capacity to disguise its own flaws, even through religion, seems endless. Pyramid or patriarchal logic is only "logical" when applied in favor of the system and the status quo—which it proudly calls the "real world." Our very inability to recognize that shows how little influence the dynamic Trinity had on our historical ways of thinking. Actually real Trinitarian thinking is more spiral, circle, and flow than pyramid.

We truly have nothing to be afraid of....In a Trinitarian Universe, reality can be pictured as an Infinite, Loving Outpouring that empowers and generates an Eternal, Loving Infolding. All we have to lose are the false images of God that do not serve us and are too small.

The foundational good news is that all of creation and all of humanity have been drawn into this loving flow (no exceptions)! We are not outsiders or spectators but inherently part of the divine dance. Such good theology can create good politics and history. We still have hope. (2)

He echoes Paul's letter to the Romans. *"All of this is because of Creator's great love that has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is a gift to us from above."* If our experience of God is one divine flow, of diversity and invitation, then our spiritual lives and churches reflect that. The Trinity matters because of relationship. The three persons of God are in relationship with each other. Not a relationship of hierarchy. Or of separate divisions of labor. But a relationship of connectedness. Of integral need of and for the other.

The Trinity matters because it means God exists in diversity. The very nature of God is diverse. Creator. Redeemer. Sustainer. Spirit. Love Incarnate - Word made flesh. That God exists in unity does not mean that God exists in uniformity. Since God exists in diversity, we are expected to seek out diversity as well. The Holy is not male or female. Both/and.

Maybe you have already let go of a triune experience of the Holy One. Maybe you are seeking different words, images, metaphors that deepen your experience. I will close with two recent Let's expand our metaphors. Let's hold them in our bodies, our minds, our being.

A new one for me comes from Beatrice Bruteau who integrates learning across fields such as mathematics, religion, science, and philosophy. In her book, *God's Ecstasy: The Creation of a Self-Creating World*, she explores Trinity from both a scientific & contemplative perspective.

. . . Trinity [shows] itself as world, especially with the characteristic Trinitarian trait of living-together, symbiosis, mutual indwelling, interacting, sharing. From elementary particles in the atom, through atoms in molecules, molecules in cells, cells in organisms, organisms in societies, to social actions and even ideas—all of them being organized as systems—the Trinitarian image, as a Many-One, as a Community, has been present and growing. "Growing" (from the inside out) is the right word; the Creativity that makes the world is built into the world as its own essence. God is creating a self-creating world....

I have called this creative act God's ecstasy. Ecstasy means standing outside oneself. It is kin to the kenosis of Philippians 2:6—being God is not a thing to be clung to, so God empties Godself, taking the form of limitation in finitude, and is born as a universe. It is the defining divine act: self-giving, being-bestowing. Ecstasy has the connotations of extreme love and supreme joy. . . .

The conclusion for the religious person should be that the world is God's most personal work, therefore something for us to know and admire and revere, to take part in, to contribute to creating.... This is participating in the divine life. . . .

My hope is that others will get a sense of how the universe is radiant and exciting and how we are poised right on the creative edge, right where the new action is happening. God's action, our action. A Self-creating universe that is God's ecstasy, God standing—indeed, **God dancing!**—outside Godself, still doing the Godly things: being One, being Community, sharing being, indwelling, rejoicing, always being more. (3)

Finally, God's triune nature is like **a musical chord of three notes**. The three distinct notes work together to make one melodious sound, existing in the same time and space, and unified in purpose while remaining separate and distinct. Each note on its own fills the auditory space and creates a beautiful sound, and yet when combined with the other two notes continues to make a unified melodious sound that fills the auditory space while remaining distinct from the other two. So this example comes close to showing how God's triune nature exists.

The Holy One in a Divine Dance, one in community, inviting us to envision a world where we participate in Beloved Community and embody this creative ecstasy, this love and joy. We lean into this love. We seek to change the discords of evil with a song of hope. When we experience God this way, we are not limited by previous hierarchical metaphors and images, but a new cyclical, intimate experience of Divine Mystery. Holy, Holy, Holy is this dance, this chord, this eternal communal relationship. Amen.

- 1) Rev. Marci Glass, "The Diversity of God," 6/8/2009 marciglass.com
<https://marciglass.com/2009/06/08/the-diversity-of-god/>
- 2) Richard Rohr, "The Circle Dance of God," 3/19/2022 Center for Action and Contemplation
<https://cac.org/daily-meditations/the-circle-dance-of-god-2022-03-16/>
- 3) Richard Rohr, "God's Ecstasy," 5/15/2019 Center for Action and Contemplation
<https://cac.org/daily-meditations/gods-ecstasy-2019-05-15/>