

The Holy Trinity, Year C — June 16, 2019

This is Trinity Sunday and probably the only day of the year when the sermon focuses not so much on one of the scripture readings for the day but rather on a theological concept, the doctrine of the Trinity. Now before you say, “OK, wake me up when *that’s* over!” let me assure you that this is really vital, important stuff. Christian teaching on the Trinity is one of the things that makes Christians *Christian*. It is a uniquely Christian understanding of the nature of God. And it is a vitally important teaching about who we are and what we do as church, not merely an intellectual puzzle to be worked out by armchair theologians. Let me say it has everything to do with how you think of your daily work in the world as a follower of Jesus.

The Holy Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is like a substance that can exist in different states like solid, liquid, or gas. Actually, that is one of the lamest analogies for the Trinity ever, so don’t let me catch you using it! Or the Trinity is like an egg: shell/white/yolk. Or water: ice/steam/liquid. Or a person who is worker/spouse/parent. Or a three blade propeller. Or a three leaf clover. Just don’t!

Not only are such analogies lame, they are heresy, specifically the heresy of modalism, an ancient heresy (that clearly won’t go away!) that says God is active in three different modes or ways, sometimes as the Father, sometimes as the Son, and other times as the Spirit. But that’s not what we mean when we say that the nature of God is triune. What we mean is that God is always, not just sometimes, three distinct persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and yet somehow one God, three persons “of one Being” as the Nicene Creed says, always Three-in-One and One-in-Three.

The problem with these modalistic pupa/larva/butterfly analogies is that they fail to capture the essential aspect of the Trinity. What we are grasping for language to say about God with the doctrine of the Trinity is that God is essentially a relationship. It takes at least two to tango. You can’t have a relationship by yourself. So if God is relationship, then there needs to be more than one person in God.

Love can’t happen in a vacuum. Love can’t happen in isolation. Love can happen only in relationship—a relationship of persons who are actively engaged in loving each other. Such is the nature of our God, we claim. God *is* love: a community of mutually loving persons. This is why

the Triune God is frequently imaged as movement, dance—never sitting still but an eternally restless movement of love.

Kind of challenges us right off the bat, doesn't it? Imagining God as a loving relationship of persons keeps us from picturing God as an old dude with a beard up in the skies. God isn't a dude at all. God is the vibrant, ever-active love pulsating at the heart of all things.

It certainly makes it hard to look at the universe in a dispassionate way when you see all of life as somehow existing in this vibrant, ongoing act of divine love. The triune God is the heartbeat of the universe without whose love nothing would exist. If the persons of the Holy Trinity ever stopped loving one another, the universe would cease to exist.

So you see what we're trying to say—even in these halting, limited ways. The nature of God is *essentially relational*.

I have always admired Craig Nesson's take on the relational nature of God.¹ He says that above all the Trinity shows us that God is relentless in mission, a mission to love.

The mission of the first person of the Trinity, God the Father, is to create a world to love. Why do you exist? Because God wanted somebody to love. Why do birds, and beagles, and pine trees, and lilacs exist? Because God wanted creatures to love. Why do planets, and stars, and suns and moons exist? Because God wanted a creation to love. In creating life God is going out of God's self in a mission of love. The creation is an expression of God's restless, missional nature, the offspring of the Trinity's love dance.

The mission of the second person of the Trinity, God the Son, is to restore to right relationship a creation that had become alienated from its Creator through sin. The loving God could not bear to let that alienation, that broken communion, prevail. So God went on a mission in person, becoming incarnate in human flesh, to heal the broken relationship between the creation and its Creator. The manger and the cross are places along the way of God's loving mission to the world. As Pastor Daniel Erlander says in one of his books, "[In Christ] God is on a mission to mend the entire universe."²

The mission of the third person of the Trinity, God the Holy Spirit, is God going out of God's self in love for us every moment of every day of our lives. The Holy Spirit is the divine power that gives us faith, announces the forgiveness of sins, and enables us to meet God regularly in the common elements of water, bread, and wine.

The Trinity shows us a God who always has been and ever shall be on a mission to love the world.

We speak of the church as also having a mission. We speak of ourselves as having a mission in daily life as believers. What is that mission? It is simply to join God's mission that is already in progress: a mission to forgive, to heal, to mend broken relationships, to lift up the lowly. Our mission is nothing more, and nothing less, than to participate in God's work in the world.

A recently elected bishop of one of our synods said this about the mission of the church: "The needs of our neighbors are our mission." When we wonder about the way forward, when we wonder what we should do, how do we gain clarity about the specifics of our mission? We talk to our neighbors. We ask them what they need. We try to figure out how we can help them. We ask ourselves how we can love them.

This congregation has Reading Buddies and Math Buddies partnerships with our local schools because we went to the schools, asked them what they needed, and figured out how we could help. We have a congregation of Chin immigrants, mostly refugees, who worship in this very space because we listened to these neighbors talk about their need and figured out a way to help. We have Easter Seals in our building Monday through Friday every week, teaching life skills to adults with intellectual disabilities because we took the time to listen to our neighbors and figure out how we could help. As you know, these are but a few examples of how our mission as a congregation is shaped by listening for the needs of our neighbors. We will continue to listen, for it is the only way we can ever be clear about what we are called to do.

And for you too in your daily walk as a disciple of Jesus, a child of the Triune God. How do you gain clarity about what you are called to do? Listen to others. Try to figure out how you can help. What you hear from your neighbors and do in response becomes your mission—your sharing in God's work of loving the world. And listening for your neighbor's need is the only way to come by that clarity about your call in life.

But is that really any surprise, that the life of faith involves being called into relationship with others? I suppose not if we believe that our God is the Triune God, a relationship of loving persons, who always surround us and summon us forward in love. Go in peace to love and to serve — that is your mission, should you choose to accept it.

¹ Dr. Craig Nesson is Academic Dean and Professor of Contextual Theology and Ethics at Wartburg Theological Seminary. His insights on the missional nature of the Trinity are what I remember from hearing him speak on the topic a number of years ago in various settings.

² Erlander, Daniel. *Manna and Mercy: A Brief History of God's Unfolding Promise to Mend the Entire Universe*. Erlander, 1992.