

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale
Sunday, May 26, 2024

Friends, I invite you to join me in the spirit of prayer. Let's pray. Loving and gracious God, you move in our hearts and minds at all times, particularly when we gather trusting in the promises you have made to us that cross generations. We pray especially this morning that we feel your presence amongst us, that you prepare us to hear your word, that in it we might see you clearly and carry our experience of you, of your love, Grace, and the promises that guide our lives when we go from this place out into the world. Amen.

Our scripture this morning comes from the Gospel of John, selections from the first chapter. Let us hear these words.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and that life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness shall not overcome it. The True Light which enlightens everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man but of God. And the word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a Father's only Son, full of grace and truth. From his fullness we have all received Grace upon Grace. The law indeed was given through Moses. Grace and Truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God, the only Son who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Friends, these are the words of Our Lord. Thanks be to God.

This holiday weekend we are starting the first of a summerlong sermon series called Theology 101. It's a chance for us to look, spend some time thinking a little bit deeper about the theological ideas and concepts that undergird our faith, those that we find in our scriptures, in the words of our prayers and our hymns, the things that we live and breathe, but very often, unless you've spent considerable time in theological education, we don't talk about in the same way. As Jeanene shared with the children, today is Trinity Sunday, so I pulled the short stick and will be trying to explain to you all the Trinity. Every time we come to Trinity Sunday I think about a story about my husband James's Aunt Charlotte. Aunt Charlotte is a talker, and over the course of the 20 years that I have been married to James, I have watched dear Charlotte move from mother to children, to grandmother to children, moving through the ranks of the family until she is one of the matriarchs left with us now. And at the last family reunion we gathered, and she was holding court in the corner of the hotel and was telling stories and chatting and talking talking talking, as is Charlotte's want. And at one point she took a very deep breath and said, "I've said more than I know," and that's how I feel when we start talking about the Trinity. It feels like when we celebrate Trinity Sunday, we're just counting off how many heresies we can get to before noon, and it feels quite often that the best thing would be to say it's a mystery and take a bow and sit down. But this day is an important day in the life of the church. It is one of the only days I can think of where we devote a whole day to a teaching of the church

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that's not explicitly outlined in our scriptures. A doctrine of the Trinity doesn't appear anywhere in our Bible, not in exhaustive concordances or any notes section. We will see hints of what the doctrine of the Trinity might be when we hear, as David shared in the baptism, Jesus is called to go and baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. We see echoes of it in our text from John this morning, a text that talks about how the word of God, the logos, Jesus the Christ, existed in the Godhead before time, and all things came into being through him; and, yet, even then in that particular text there's no explicit mention of the Holy Spirit. This is because we didn't have a doctrine of the Trinity until almost 350 years post the crucifixion of Jesus. It was 200 years before someone—Tertullian, if you really need to know—uses the word Trinity in reference to the faith of Christians. It was more than a hundred years after that that we received...decided on a fully formed doctrine of the Trinity that was formulated by the councils of Nicaea and Constantinople. And in that 350 years and even in the years since, there are countless ways that the faithful people understood their experiences with God. The road that got us to a Nicene Creed, which we will share together later in the service, was a very painful one. The Christian Church split into Western and Eastern factions over the understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit. People were excommunicated. They were burned at the stake. They were murdered for how they understood the Trinity. So this is no little thing that we talk about today. The Trinity is something that makes no sense when we try to explain it. It is absurd on its face to claim three and yet one. Three persons, one substance. And, yet, that is what our experience and our scriptures have led us to believe, and we are using insufficient words to describe something that we really can't grasp. When we talk about the Trinity, we're talking about the way we understand the presence of God in our collective faith life, both now and throughout history. We have neither the language nor the capacity to grasp the fullness of God. We are lucky if like Moses and the story that's told in Exodus, we can catch a glimpse of God's robe as God moves by. It is hard to understand and explain; and, yet, it is something very deep, something intrinsic to us. The idea of three is found everywhere—in architecture, in math, in music, indeed in our very bodies. There is something very holy and divine ingrained in this idea of three. And to make it even more confusing the doctrine of the Trinity is steeped in the language of classical Greek philosophy, which I am not an expert on and in my opinion has very little to do with how we think and speak now. So we say three persons, one substance. We talk about homoousios, and it has no meaning for us the way that it would have meant for the people who formulated this doctrine back in 350 CE. Many of us may have grown up reciting the Nicene Creed in worship. We did it in my home Church on Communion Sundays, so at least once a month we stood up and said “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of Heaven and Earth, and of all things visible and invisible, and in one Lord Jesus Christ, only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, light of light, very God of very God.” Now I can recite that for you, but I cannot tell you exactly what that means. It's language that is distant from us; and so sometimes when we are wrestling with understanding God, it's easier to say what we know it doesn't mean. I know that the Trinity does not mean that God is three equal partners with different responsibilities, let's say like a board of directors or partners in a law firm, as an example. There are not three different tasks and three different gods. When we rely on that kind of language, it loses the connection of the one God whose works may be distinct but are not separate from one another. When we say we believe in a Triune God, we are not saying that we

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believe of a godhead that is a boss and two subordinates, two deputies, like a director and their two assistant directors. Now this image protects the oneness of God, but it suggests that Christ and the Spirit are not really God With Us. They are just something sent from the more powerful Father image. What I heard recently is that the doctrine of the Trinity does not mean that God is like three players in a basketball game, each substituting themselves in to take a turn. You can see how easy that could be to envision three different gods. That basketball metaphor forgets that there has and has only ever been one God in the game, the God who is at every moment simultaneously creator and sustainer of all, helper and redeemer of the needy and the sinful, and life giving presence. The doctrine of the Trinity does not mean that God is like an actor who plays three different roles in the same play, or the heresy that I'm probably the fondest of relying on—the doctrine of the Trinity does not mean that God is like one person that wears many different hats. Like me, for example. I am in this moment among many other things a child, a mother, and a sister; and while that seems the easiest to get the closest to what I believe God may be, it can also be imagery that easily suggests that there's a true God hidden away behind these roles. The actor is never the roles that they play; and it also forgets that I, although I am many things, I can only truly perform one role at a time, most often at the detriment of all of those other things that I am. God, on the other hand, is always the same all the time with all people—powerful creator, loving friend, and giver of new life with nothing being abandoned or dropped or let go. Now each of these analogies fall short, but we use them and we hear them because each of them reveals a sliver of the truth about the Trinity. When we try and translate ancient languages into words that connect more meaningfully to us, we might take the gander to say that one God in three persons could mean one personal God who lives and works in three different ways at the same time. Now does that clear everything up? I didn't think so. My favorite imagery for what I believe the doctrine of the Trinity is trying to draw us into is that of a dance, that the Trinity itself dances together. It's one of the oldest understandings of the Trinity, and it's called the perichoresis, but the idea is that the dancers in a dance move and shift and change position and place, but the dance itself—God, in this analogy—never stops moving. Sometimes it's difficult to tell which dancer is dancing lead, because it's all dancing all the time. Paul Young, the author of *The Shack*, described this dance as a circle of relationship, not a chain of command. Relationship without any overlay of power. Now, as I said at the beginning, any theologian versed in Trinitarian doctrine could easily poke a hole in all of these images and metaphors. And that brings me to say again that all of our language about God at any time in any place is woefully inadequate. The problem we have with the doctrine of the Trinity, friends, is that we're attempting to put into words something that is completely beyond our ken. That's why we are taking stabbing, glancing stabs at it, like we are squinting to see the particulars of something that we can barely comprehend—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, our most common framing of the Trinity. Sister Sandra Snider jokes that that does not mean God is two men and a bird. It's a reminder that when we focus too much on our language, the particular language that we use for God, we are always going to miss the boat. If we think of the words we use around the Trinity, the Trinitarian language we use, as forming a box, imagine how silly it would be to try and stuff God into any box, much less a box that is only bounded by three words. Throughout our scripture the nature of God is described in countless ways. Scripture witnesses God's presence as loving parent, righteous judge, wisdom, Lord of Light, Prince of Peace, comforter, healer,

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mother hen, bear, eagle, hawk. We cannot simply reduce all of those to language of Father, Son, and Spirit. St. Augustine describes the Trinity as love, beloved, and love—God as the Lover who creates all things, Christ as the Beloved of all creation, and the Spirit as the manifestation and bond of Love between the Lover and the Beloved. John Calvin offers up another alternative based on his commentary on Isaiah. He uses Mother, Child and Womb, because God chose the lightness of mother to express relationship to the children of Israel. So God can be understood as compassionate mother, Christ as beloved child, Spirit as lifegiving womb. Father, Son, Spirit, Mother, Child, Womb, Lover, Beloved, Love—the more language we are open to using the more we can begin to maybe approach the reality of the God that we worship. Language is important, and it is always important to remember that our language is inadequate; and God Is never bound by our words.

One God, three persons— we might never understand it, and yet, truthfully, the Trinity is not something we're called to understand. It is something we experience. Our scripture testifies to us that God exists in community. The three persons of our one God share one goal, one calling. They exist individually and yet are stronger together than they are apart. Scripture testifies that we, friends, have been created to be in relationship, in community with God and with each other. And at its very basis that relationship is called to mirror the mystery, the complexity, and the tenderness we experience in our Triune God, the Triune God who before time envisioned us, called us. The True Light which enlightened everyone is still coming into the world, so whatever we make of the language of the Trinity, it is rooted in the promise that God loved us and loves us still and that God shows up in our lives in ways that we struggle to articulate, but ways that we know are present with us. We trust that God's love, Father, Son, Spirit, is among us even now hearing when our words are inadequate and responding to our prayers and our needs just as we are. This is the promise of the Trinity. Amen.