

Messiah Moravian Church
May 30, 2021
Trinity Sunday
Dane Perry

HOW DO YOU SAY GOD?

Jerry Harris is a sneaky fellow! He goes out of town and leaves a substitute in the pulpit to deliver the message for Trinity Sunday. Trinity Sunday is the only Sunday that celebrates a doctrine of the church, a doctrine that many preachers dread trying to explain. I wonder how many preachers all over the world have pondered the doctrine of the Trinity this past week and frantically searched for something encouraging to say to their congregations today. The great theologian and preacher Martin Luther warned that “to deny the Trinity is to risk our salvation: to try and explain the Trinity is to risk our sanity.” Nevertheless, as Alexander Pope famously wrote, “For fools rush in where angels fear to tread.” So here we go.

I am sure you have heard many of the tired old clichés about the Trinity that conjure up images of triangles, shamrocks or the capacity of water to exist as liquid, ice or steam while still maintaining its unified essence. From my youth, I remember a sermon that once compared the Trinity to Three-In-One machine oil!

The Trinitarian formula appears in Scripture only once, in Matthew, chapter 28, during what is called the Great Commission. Jesus commands the disciples to go forth, baptizing in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Yet the doctrine of the Trinity does not appear in the Bible. The doctrine developed over hundreds of years, and it was almost 350 years after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus before the Church finally articulated the full-fledged doctrine of the Trinity that is confessed by Christians today.

Theologian Elizabeth Johnson traces the origin of Trinitarian thinking to the early Christians who,

...experienced the saving God in a threefold way as beyond them, with them, and within them, that is, as utterly transcendent, as present historically in the person of Jesus, and as present in the spirit within their community. These were all encounters with only one God. Accordingly, they began to talk about God in this threefold pattern: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” Early Christian letters and gospels are filled with this threefold cadence that appears in hymns, pithy greetings, confessions of faith, liturgical formulas, doxologies and short rules of faith In the process, the monotheistic view of God flexed to incorporate Jesus and the Spirit.... [The] language [of those early Christians] expanded creatively to accommodate their threefold religious experience.

For those early Christians a Trinitarian understanding of the nature of God grew out of their experience of God's presence working among and through them, and not as an attempt to define or formulate a theological statement. Their early understanding of God's presence should guide us in our attempts to understand the Trinity as a doctrine that is a feeble attempt to comprehend the incomprehensible mystery of God's nature. The doctrine of the Trinity was intended as a tool to help us.

Yet down through the centuries some Christians have almost idolized the doctrine of the Trinity and insisted that we worship the Trinity as if it were God's very self. Often Christians have worried more about believing in the Trinity than relating to the One that the Trinity attempts to describe.

It is far more important to have a relationship with God than it is to understand doctrines about God. If the doctrine of the Trinity helps us to relate to God, then it can be said to be life-giving. When the doctrine of the Trinity helps us to relate to God's creation, then it can be said to be life-giving. But when the doctrine of the Trinity is reduced to a formula that we must believe in order to be "good Christians", then it runs the risk of inhibiting our experience of God and stealing from us life-giving relationships with God and the world that God loves.

If the doctrine of the Trinity helps us understand or articulate some aspects of God that you have experienced, then by all means we should embrace and celebrate it. But if the doctrine gets in the way of our experience of God, then we need to move beyond it. If the doctrine causes us to condemn a fellow creature or to look down upon someone who is seeking wisdom by another path, then we ought to reconsider.

We should not fear to rethink our notions about God. For if we have learned anything about the nature of God, it is that God is beyond our abilities to pin down. Our attempts at describing God are only as good as the effect they have on the way we live in communion with God and with all that God loves.

We call God by many names because we recognize the limits of human language and we realize that no one name for God captures the fullness of God. Ultimately, all of the individual voices merge together to call God One. In the hymn "Bring Many Names" by composer Brian Wren, we hear possibilities for ways to speak of God. The lyrics describe: "Strong mother God, working night and day, planning all the wonders of creation"; "Warm father God, hugging every child, feeling all the strains of human living"; "Old aching God... wiser than despair"; "Young, growing God, eager, on the move, crying out for justice"; and, finally, in the last verse, "Great, living God, never fully known, joyful darkness far beyond our seeing, closer yet than breathing...." So, in our worship and our lives, we experience God differently, yet we all call God one.

How do *you* say God?

In closing, let me describe an analogy of the Trinity that helps me begin to appreciate the Trinity. More than anything else, the Trinity is about relationship, a relationship created and sustained by love. Almost 1800 year ago St. Augustine of Hippo wrote about the Trinity in fifteen treatises. In one of those, he used a concept that I can grasp without indulging in heresy. In addition to thinking about the Trinity in the traditional terms such as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit or as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, he suggested that we think of the Trinity as “Lover, Beloved and Love itself.”

The scriptures affirm that God *is* love. If God is love, then God is one who loves, and God is one who is loved. God models for us the relationship that he desires from us: we are created to be united in loving relationships with one another and with God.

Together, we are all part of God’s family, children of God, as Paul affirms in our reading from Romans. Together--that is the operative word. If I were asked for only one word to describe how Trinitarian doctrine should impact the life of the church today, I would choose “together.” It is a word that is relational, expresses the quality of friendship and offers a sense of hope.

Together, all of us, in God’s beloved family.