

Trinity: Freestyle

Isaiah 11: 1-5
Matthew 3: 13-17
September 29, 2013
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I. Introduction

Psychology professor Robert Cialdini was doing some research on what constituted good scientific writing. How do you write about science in a way that engages a reader? And he started doing some experiments with his college classes about how to engage them in the listening and learning process and he started to figure that if he posed them with a mystery at the beginning of the class and then invited them to live in and unpack that mystery, they stayed engaged throughout the entire period of the class whereas, usually, sometime towards the end they start to lose interest and drift and pack up their books and stuff. But if he framed everything as a mystery, people engaged all the way through the process until they came to the end.

So, he started to teach all of his classes this way and he wrote his classic psychology textbook with each chapter as a mystery to be engaged in because there's something about the process of unpacking a mystery that invites us into a dialogue. It invites us to search. It makes us part of the process which is why all of our great theological truths are framed as mysteries. Not mysteries that we can't know anything about, but mysteries that we can never know all of in their entirety and so they invite us again into a lifelong journey of engagement.

We are unpacking one of the great mysteries of our Christian faith over the last month, the mystery of the Trinity. And we have used as sort of the central image throughout this journey this picture that's on your bulletin of three people in a dance, *Dancing partners* is the name of the series and that picks up this wonderful, ancient theological term that is used about the Trinity, *perichoresis*, which means to dance around and refers to the way in which the persons of the Trinity intertwine and interact and are part of one another.

We started the process at the beginning using this dancing image, calling the dance. How do we name the persons of the Trinity and how does our language reflect who we are, who we understand the Trinity to be and what the Trinity is about?

Last week we talked about *Choreography*, that was the name of the sermon, and when you think of dancers in a tightly choreographed dance, they're different people but they're moving in complete harmony and synergy. We talked about the oneness of God, expressing the unity of God's being and the trustworthiness of God and the consistency of who God is.

Today's sermon is entitled *Freestyle* which is if you picture people dancing, the place in which the partners of the dance can spread out and do a little bit of their own dance, as they are part of this larger harmony so that we're looking at the different persons of the Trinity and the differentiation within the persons of the Trinity as we close out our series today.

II. The concept of the Trinity did not begin as an abstract theological doctrin

As we have touched on, over the last few weeks, there's nothing in the Bible that talks about a doctrine of the Trinity. In fact, the word "trinity" is not used in the Bible at all. It's a later development sometime around the mid-second century. A man by the name of Theodotus first used the term trinity, he actually was a heretic and so, the term didn't catch on right away, but got picked up by the theologian Tertullian at the beginning of the third century. He developed a wondrous array of sort of images about who the Trinity is.

But the fact that the doctrine of the Trinity doesn't develop until a little later doesn't mean that it wasn't present from the beginning because when you look at the stories of scripture, what you'll see very clearly from the earliest witness of our faith is that the church was wrestling with this idea that in the person of Jesus Christ, in the life and ministry and death and resurrection of Christ they had experienced God.

So you see, from very early on in our community's story, language about Jesus that makes very clear that Jesus is divine. You have the writer of the gospel of John saying at the very beginning of the gospel, "In the beginning was the word and the word was God and was with God and everything was created through the word and this word through which everything was brought into being became flesh and dwelt among us."

And you have Jesus, of course, also saying that, and "The Father and I are one."

But then you had this confusing experience in that, Jesus who is one with the Father is also praying to the Father? What does it mean for God to pray to God's self?

It's sort of a confusing idea and Jesus using terms of great intimacy about his relationship with the Father, referring to the Father as Abba, as Daddy. So that, the church from its beginning was trying to wrestle with: what does it mean to say that Jesus is God and praying to God?

And then of course, they have this very powerful experience of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, which is God that has touched and transformed each of them interiorly and this spirit that is referred to throughout the Hebrew Scriptures that gets released on them with new power through the resurrection of Jesus.

So, the early church started to understand that in their experience of God they were experiencing this one God, this God that they have always worshipped, but they were experiencing God in three very different ways. And they started to understand this as three different persons who were bound up in this divine being by their mutual love.

So, we've talked about this image of the dance as connoting the fact that God in God's being is in relationship, that God shares God's own love with God's self and thus is completely complete by God's self but then also inviting us as God's children, as God's creation to be in this wondrous dance of love with God.

We see this dance at work throughout the writings of the New Testament in this wonderful passage from Matthew of Jesus' baptism as one of those very clear places, and it's a beautiful image in which all three persons of the Trinity are present and working. We see Jesus, obviously, at the center of the story experiencing baptism from John, but then we see the Father sending the Holy Spirit down onto Jesus and

proclaiming to the people gathered that this is “my beloved.” So, all of the three persons are active and present in that wonderful tableau of who God is.

And then of course, the early church as it starts to understand this interrelationship of the Godhead starts to look at its own scriptures of the Hebrew bible and see those same persons at work. You heard in that wonderful passage from Isaiah, language about who God is very, very similar to the baptismal stories so that we have the plant that springs out of the root of Jesse. So, we’ve got this image that Tertullian uses of God as a tree, of the father being the roots and the son being the trunk and the branches and the spirit being the fruit. You see that rich image in this Isaiah passage.

So, the early church started to understand that this trinity of persons within the Godhead was not simply ways that they had experienced or got pictures on to who God is, but was an expression of who God is in God’s essence. That God had always been this trinity of persons from the very beginning, interrelating with one another and calling creation to being and into this wondrous dance.

So, it started trying to figure out how these persons relate and all of the creeds in our church, you’ve probably have figured out, are not so much about what we believe but about what we don’t believe. Did you all notice that when the church comes together to argue about something we never figure out what the answer is, we just figure out what parts we want to exclude from the dialogue, right? So, all of the creeds that we have crafted around who God is, are intended to sort of set the parameters for who we understand God to be. Understanding also that we can never

plumb the depths of who God is and so we're invited again into this ongoing mystery, but the parameters are that God is one God. We're not polytheists as some of our early Jewish brothers and sisters accused us of being. But we also understand that God is not monolithic and we need to keep those intentions.

III. Who God Is

What we have understood as we talked about God is that we experience God -- this is the language of the theologian Leonardo Boff -- "As completely higher, as radically other, as transcended, as omnipotent," but at the same time we experience God as radically with us. That we experience God through the incarnation of Jesus Christ as not simply appearing to be a person but actually being a person and experiencing everything that we experience, all of the joys and all of the sorrows and all of the hope and all of the pain, experiencing suffering and death. So, in that being completely, radically with us and then we also experience the Spirit, God within us, that still quiet place that resides in each of our hearts that if we can just silence the busyness of our minds a little bit, we start to know.

IV. That is how the Trinity comes to meet us: the Father is the infinite "upward," and the Son is the radical "alongside," and the Spirit is the total "within."

And what the early church wanted us to understand is we need all three of those pieces to fully experience who God is. We've got to have a God who is omnipotent and transcendent and all-powerful, but if we miss God as also present with us we miss the call to radical discipleship to radical community. If we miss the Spirit that is within us, we miss the opportunity to be in ongoing dialogue with that God who

has created us and called us. So, we need all of those pieces to fully experience who God is and who God had called us to be.

The early church was very clear in also affirming that each of those persons of the Trinity were coequal and had equal authority and power, that we live in a world in which we like to subordinate relationships and so it's very easy to see God the Father as being in-charge and the Spirit and the Son as subordinate persons of the Trinity. The early church said, "No, all of those pieces are equally important and have something equally important to say to us about whom God is and who we are."

The early church is also clear in saying that we couldn't assign certain persons of the Trinity to certain tasks. So, while there's some wonderful beauty in the language of God as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, the early church wanted us to understand that the Father creates and the Son creates.

Colossians talks about everything being brought into being through the Son, and the Spirit also is part of the creative process. Genesis also says, "The spirit of God moved over the face of the waters," so that it's not just the Father who creates. The Father creates, the Son creates, and the Spirit creates. It's not just the Son who redeems. The Father redeems, the Spirit redeems and there's language about that in the scriptures as well. The church did not want us classifying the persons of the Trinity into certain tasks. The Trinity is always working as a whole, but working in different ways and again inviting us into the dance in different ways.

That has some very significant things to say then about whom we are and how we live out of that reality of the Trinity. It says, for one thing, that we need, at points, to

be in relationships that are hierarchical because, as in parents and children, there's some built-in hierarchy to that relationship. Or at least those of us who are parents keep wanting there to be, we're not always successful, but there's this sense of the parent providing the nurture and the guidance and the vision.

But that's not an autocratic relationship; it's a relationship of a parent and a child in which the child's well-being is always the parent's primary concern. So, that is always a relationship deeply rooted in love and nurturing even though there's a hierarchical element to it. We need that in our relationship with God and we need that periodically in our relationship as a community.

But there's also that radical equality that God has incarnated in the person of Jesus. So that, there are also places in our relationship with God when we need to know that God isn't just the parent, but that God is also a sibling to us, with us along every step of the path, and that we are also called to live in a radical harmony and familial relationship with the people around us in the community of faith and that there is an equality there.

This also, of course, has to do with how we live out our life as a Metropolitan community of one church in three different locations. We want to affirm that in this new creation that we have called into being as we have merged our churches together, we are now one church. We have one common vision as a church: to extend radical hospitality, to pursue justice and to transform lives. That's our call as a Metropolitan Church Community and we all share that.

But that call may manifest itself in some different ways here at Metropolitan than it does down at Crossroads or at Crossroads than it does over at Wesley. So that, there's this wonderful opportunity for all being one body together called with the same call to transform the world in the same way, but we can manifest that call with some different hues and some different tempos. We can maintain our own specialness as a Metropolitan Church and as a Crossroads Church and a Wesley Church while still being part of this wondrous dance with one another in which we are called to fulfill our vision as a broader Metropolitan community.

At points in that dynamic different pieces of our community may take leadership and at other places we will be called to be in radical partnership with one another. But we can live into that because that's how God models what it is to be God, this wondrous dance of Father, Son and Spirit; of lover, of beloved, of love; of roots, of tree, of fruit. All of these beautiful images of what it means to be God and what it means to be made in God's image as the people of God.

V. Conclusion

So, as we close our series today, I want to invite you to not make this the end of this exploration, but to grasp this wonderful call of mystery that we can continue to live into who God is as we explore, come to more and more understanding of who God is. That we can as we search the scriptures and study together we can look for those places where the Trinity is at work and as we pray we can ask God for further revelation and understanding so that as we understand who God is, we can understand who we need to be.

I would also want you to walk away from this couple of weeks together with a very profound sense that God is about relationship. God lives in relationship with God's own self, God seeks relationship with us and God calls us to be in relationship with one another. This dance involves dancing partners and we are all partners for each other in that dance of exploring who God is and seeking to live God's will out in the world. This is who we are at our very being because it's who God is at God's very being.

The great evolutionist preacher, Henry Ward Beecher's last words as he died, to the people who had gathered around his deathbed, were, "Now, comes the mystery." He was excited about the opportunity to live deeper into the mystery of love that he had preached about his whole life.

For each of us now comes the mystery. How do we take this truth about who God is and internalize that to make it who we are? How do we accept God's offer to invite us into a dance? A dance that transforms us and as we dance transforms the world.

Amen.