

*June 15, 2019 was Trinity Sunday and Pastor Joel gave a teaching sermon on the origins and meaning of the doctrine of the Trinity. The Lectionary readings for the day were Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31, Psalm 8, and John 16:12-15, and his message was entitled "The Trinity: Where Do We Fit In?"*

Today is Trinity Sunday, the day in the church calendar that we lift up the concept and doctrine of the triune God. The God we worship, identified in the classical phrasing: "Father, Son and Holy Spirit."

In the United Church of Christ, we affirm this triune understanding of God, although we might name it in some different, creative ways: Creator, Christ and Spirit; Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier; Mother, Child and Breath of God; or as Kate suggested, Choreographer, Dancer and Dance; Such liberality in the giving of various names are meant to help us have a deeper understanding of the God we worship, a God who is ultimately mystery and unknowable.

The concept of the Trinity has long been a difficult one for people to grasp. We sometimes try to explain it with analogies like the different states of water: liquid, ice and vapor, or as St. Patrick used the 3-leaf clover. But these are seldom adequate and we might today, even ask, why do we even need such a teaching? Why do we even need the Trinity? What does it teach us and how does it help us understand, or more importantly, how does it help us in our relationship with the God of our faith?

To answer that, I need to first give us some background. Scripture, does not specifically tell us about a "Trinity." The word "trinity" is not found in either the Hebrew or New Testament scriptures. However, there is reference in the gospels as well as in Paul's letters, where mention of "Father, Son and Holy Spirit", or other similar phrasing is found. At the end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus says to his

followers as he ascends, "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .*" (Matt. 28:19) and Paul in II Corinthians 13:14 says, "*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*" And even in the Hebrew scriptures, where God is without question, seen as one and undivided, we find references where God is referred to in plural form, such as in the creation story of Genesis, where God says, "*Let us make humanity in our image, after our likeness . . .*" (Gen. 1:26), or in the story of Abraham, where God appears to him as *three* visitors to his tent (Gen. 18:1-15).

But the real stuff on the concept or doctrine of the Trinity began in the development of the early church in the first few centuries. The early church, which came to proclaim Jesus, who they experienced in risen form, understood him as "*Lord and Savior*" against an occupying culture that named Caesar as "*Lord and Savior*" and as a divine "*Son of God.*" If indeed Jesus was the Christ, and not Caesar, then he must also be God. But Jesus couldn't be God in *addition* to the God of Israel, *his God*, since clearly the God of Israel was a singular deity, as proclaimed in the Hebrew *Shema*, the beginning commandment of the Laws of Moses, "*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*" (Deut. 6:4-5/Mk. 12:29-30).

So the early church fathers wrestled with this. One of the first Trinitarian

formulas came at the end of the 1st century by Clement of Rome who wrote: *"Do we not have one God, and one Christ, and one gracious Spirit that has been poured out upon us, and one calling in Christ?"* Ignatius of Antioch in 110, and Justin Martyr also wrote similar things. And the first of the early church fathers to be recorded using the word "Trinity" was Theophilus of Antioch writing in the late 2nd century. He defines the Trinity as: *God, His Word (Logos) and His Wisdom (Sophia)*, following the early Christian practice of identifying the Holy Spirit as the *Wisdom of God* (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trinity>), as we heard in our reading today from Proverbs.

But the actual hammering out process of getting the right wording, took centuries and many long, heated debates and councils. In his text, Faith Seeking Understanding An Introduction to Christian Theology, Daniel Migliore writes, *"Over the course of several centuries, the church formulated an explicit doctrine of the Trinity. Two milestones in the development of this doctrine were the Councils of Nicea (325 A.D.) and Constantinople (381 A.D.). The crux of the classical Niceno-Constantinopolitan teaching is that God is "one in essence, distinguished in three persons. While this technical language of fourth-century metaphysics (mia ousia treis hypostaseis) is strange to us, the intent is to describe the reality of the living God in conformity with the gospel story."(p.70-71).*

There were of course, a number of other variations or what would come to be heretical understandings of the Trinity, such as *Arianism* a form of *subordinationism* (where God the Father is ranked above the other two parts of the Trinity and not equal), *modalism* (where the persons of the Trinity represent only three modes or aspects of the divine revelation, not distinct and coexisting persons in the divine nature) and *tritheism* (where the persons of the Trinity are seen as three distinct gods). If you would appreciate a bit of humor on this complex topic, I would recommend a Youtube video put out

by Lutheran Satire.

Eventually, in the fourth century, we arrived with the Athanasian Creed: *"The catholic faith is this: that we worship one God in trinity, and trinity in unity; neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance. For there is one person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost; but the Godhead of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Ghost is all one."*

So, how does this doctrine, this teaching, help us in our faith and in life? Well, as Kate and I were headed home from a meeting in Waterville yesterday, we discussed this. And she shared her favorite image of the Trinity. It is simply the idea that God is *Lover, Beloved and Love*. And so you don't think Kate is making up some new, crazy, liberal concept, this same idea was also espoused by Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in northern Africa, in the 5th century. Kate talked about how this is clearly seen in the story of Jesus' baptism, where, as he comes up out of the water, the heavens opened, and the Spirit of God descended upon him, and a voice from heaven said, *"This is my Beloved, in whom I am well pleased."* And from there, that Spirit drove him out into the wilderness, where he would come to know and accept his calling.

It is based on the understanding that God, the God we worship, is *Love*, and the idea that love cannot exist alone. For there to be *Love*, there must be a *Lover* and there must be an object of that Lover's affections, the *Beloved*. One part cannot exist without the others. It is a model of *relationship*. A working together, or as Kate would say, a *dance!* A movement of the parts in coordination with the others. An interplay, a dynamic, creative, and interpersonal relationship, that spawns an energy, a vitality, a movement, to all that would be open to its infectious presence!

If then, we understand that the core of God is *relationship*, then it follows that we find God, and therefore find our deepest

meaning, in *relationship* as well. In *loving relationship*.

When Kate and I lead worship, we are very much aware of a dynamic of energy that flows between us when we do it together. It is not the same when we lead alone. When it is just one of us and the congregation, the energy seems more stagnant, more one dimensional. When it is the two of us, or others involved in the leadership up front, there is a different movement of energy, it circulates, you can feel it. It is like that dance, and there are times when you can almost feel the Spirit moving around, flying about, touching various hearts around the room! And it is not just in worship, but this is something we experience whenever we work or collaborate

together with compassion and kindness and hospitality and generosity in the name of *Love*, and become one with the *Lover and the Beloved*.

This is where we fit in. This is how we engage with our Trinitarian God. Our *God of Love*. It's when we give ourselves over to this *Lover*, follow in the steps and movements of the *Beloved* and fall into the *dance* that is *Love*, it is there that we receive our calling, there that we know our purpose, there that we come to know our true selves, and there that we change the world.

May we be so bold, as to step forward as one, and together, *dance* with our God.  
***Lover, Beloved and Holy Love! Amen!***