

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
 East Moline, Illinois  
 Pastor Becky Sherwood  
**May 27, 2018, Trinity Sunday**  
 Psalm 29, John 3:1-17  
**THE TRINITY IN WORDS AND SONG**

This week my preaching e-group has been arguing about whether or not we should actually say the “T” word, “Trinity,” on Trinity Sunday.

If you think you feel confused about the Trinity, then let me be the first to tell you that many pastors feel confused about the Trinity too.

If you go into your Bibles to look up the word “Trinity” you won’t find it there. The idea or doctrine of the Trinity started being talked about 50 to 80 years after Jesus ascended to Heaven. *(See note at end)*

It was the way our early fathers and mothers of faith talked about the way humans had experienced God throughout history: as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Once Jesus had gone to Heaven they realized they needed to find ways to talk about each of the ways that the One true God had come to be part of our lives.

Two of the most recognizable places we see their ideas are in the Apostles’ Creed which was presented in its earliest form around 180 A.D. and the Nicene Creed which was worked on in 325 A.D. and finalized in 451 A.D.

The problem with saying the “T” word and spending a sermon trying to explain this doctrine or belief about the Trinity, is that we get tangled up pretty quickly in discussions of what it means that the one God comes to us in the three persons or faces of the Trinity.

Our logical minds start to wonder how can three be one, and one three  
and it goes downhill from there.

God begins to feel like a math problem that can’t be solved.

As some of my colleagues pointed out this week, if we get tangled up on the doctrine of the Trinity, then we miss spending time with the gift of the many ways that our God comes to us in love.

This morning in our reading from John’s gospel we heard one of the more famous verses of the Bible in John 3:16 and I always like to include verse 17 too:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

The Bible doesn’t use the word Trinity, and for the rest of this sermon I’m not going to use it either.

Instead I’m going to invite you to consider with me the ways that our God so loves us and loves the worlds, and some of pictures that the Bible gives us of that love.

We are also going to use our *Glory to God* Hymnals to sing some of those images of God’s love.

So I invite you to go ahead now and get one of the hymnals. The hymns we will be singing throughout this sermon are listed in your bulletin, but I will also be giving you the hymn numbers when it’s time for each of them.

Some of the language the Bible uses to paint pictures of **God’s love** include: Source, Creator,

Judge, Shield, Fortress, Rock, Father, Mother, Womb, and Ruler of the Universe.

Mangan, Louise & Nancy Wyse with Lori Farr, *Living the Christ Life—Rediscovering the Season of the Christian Year*, Kelowna, BC, Canada: Wood Lake Books, 2001, p. 187

We see God's loving creativity all around us here in the Quad Cities. Think about all the different ways you've seen the Mississippi River look, sometimes all on the same day.

There is the clear calm when the river looks like a lake,  
and the days the mist rises and hangs over the river,  
and the windy days when the power of God is seen in the whitecaps on the river.

There is the beauty of creation in the birds along the river: the geese, eagles, gulls, pelicans and herons.

And we see God's power to bring growth and change as the green stalks of corn and soybeans are beginning to show in the fields in their uniform rows.

Another way we see God's creativity and love is when we look into the faces of those we love. In the gift of your children, your parents, your grandchildren, your friends and family, you can see God's love for you and God's love for the people you love.

Like a parent, a father and a mother, our God watches over us and watches out for us. We know God's fathering and mothering love when we experience God's protection, God's listening and compassion, God's guidance, and God's strength filling our lives.

I invite you to turn to **Hymn #39, vv. 1-2** *Great Is Thy Faithfulness* and let us remain seated and sing together of God's Faithful love for us:

The Bible uses other word pictures to help us understand **God's love that we know in Jesus**: Messiah (Hebrew), Christ (Greek), Son of God, Son of Man, Lamb of God, Bread of Life, True Vine, Light of the World, Anchor, Never-failing Stream, Sun of Righteousness, Bright Morning Star, Living Water, Alpha and Omega, Redeemer, Suffering Servant, Good Shepherd, and Prince of Peace.  
Mangan, *Ibid*, p. 187

Each Advent and Christmas we celebrate the startling Good News that the Creator of the Universe chose to come to earth, to put on human flesh and live among us; beginning life as a tiny baby. Each year when our Sunday School children put on their Christmas pageant and we see them in robes, and head scarves and sheep costumes that have been worn by generations of children, we are reminded of this incredible good news that God comes in Jesus and lives among us.

Some of you have told me that you experience Jesus' welcome and comfort each time you look up at our stained glass window. That picture reminds you that Jesus is always standing in front of us with his arms open.

For others of you it is in the singing of a hymn, or a song on KLOV, that you feel Jesus close to you: "The Old Rugged Cross;" "What A Friend We Have in Jesus;" "Lord, You have Come to the Lakeshore;" "Here I Am Lord;" or "In the Garden."

Or sometimes it is during a time of struggle, or while you, or your loved one are in the hospital, or while grieving the loss of a loved one that you have felt Jesus close to you.

As a pastor I am always moved by Jesus' love for us and sacrifice for us during Communion as I hold out the bread and the cup to you, and my arms are stretched out, like Jesus' arms on the cross. It is such an honor for me to be able to reach toward you with the gifts of the Lord Supper that Jesus has given to us.

And it is often overwhelming to know that the living Christ is right there with us as we pass the bread and the cup to each other.

That was the promise given to Joseph in a dream before Jesus was born: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means God is with us." (Matthew 1:23)

This is our promise as well, our God is named Emmanuel; God is with us.

When we got the paperback *Sing the Faith* hymnals years ago one of the hymns that was new to us was the Hymn *Christ Be Beside Me*. I am thankful this hymn is also in our new hymnals, and I invite you to turn to **Hymn #702** in the Glory to God Hymnal, *Christ Be Beside Me*.

When we are done singing, you can keep this page open as our next hymn is also on this page.

Let us sing together the amazing life-changing love of our God in Christ who is Emmanuel, God with us.

The Bible uses other word pictures to help us understand **God's love that we know in God's Holy Spirit**: Advocate, Guide, Comforter, Counselor, Transformer, Wind, Storm, Flame, Passion, Dove and Breath.

Mangan, Ibid, p. 187

You may know God's Spirit in times of worship here in the Sanctuary, or in your own private devotions.

You may feel God's Spirit in times of solitude out in nature or surrounded by others who follow Jesus in Sunday School, or on a retreat, or even during a commission meeting!

As we sing hymns together and hear the Bible read and share the peace of Christ with each other Sunday by Sunday God's Spirit is all around us.

As we join hands each week to sing "*We Are One in the Spirit*," God's Spirit is moving and breathing through us as a Community of Faith. It is the part of our worship service that visitors most often talk about.

God's Holy Spirit is with us when we're laughing with friends or weeping in times of profound grief or sorrow

When we are rejoicing in nature, laughing with children and grandchildren, or forgiving or being forgiven by someone, God's Spirit is with us.

When we are afraid, when we are sad, when we are joyful, when we are loving, God's Spirit is with us.

God's Spirit has been with us as I have prayed with you in my office, and at gravesides and in hospitals and nursing homes.

On Christmas Eve as we sing *Silent Night* together your faces glow with the presence of God's Spirit; it's not just the glow of candlelight on your faces.

On Maundy Thursday as we stand in the darkness, singing *Were You There?*, I believe God's Spirit is teaching us about what Jesus did for us on the cross, and showing us that even in the darkest times we are not alone, but our God is always with us, even in the valleys of suffering and death.

As I told you over and over again last Sunday God's Holy Spirit lives in our hearts, as close as our next heartbeat, as close as our next breath. We are sanctuaries of the Holy Spirit.

I invite you to turn to **Hymn #701** *Sanctuary* which we will sing through two times. Let us sing together inviting God's Holy Spirit to continue to live in our hearts and shape our lives.

For God so loves the world, that God comes to us over and over again, one God, present in our lives in such a rich diversity of ways:

It is in our daily living that we experience our God, parenting us and creating new life in our midst.

It is in our daily living that Jesus speaks and says "you belong to me, you are God's child, and I am your constant Savior and Friend."

It is in our daily living that the Holy Spirit touches our lives through family and friends, through Scripture and creation, and through the ways God moves our hearts.

On this Trinity Sunday let us recognize our own living experiences of our loving God, and let us share that good news with others. We don't have to use the "T" word, unless we want to. But we can definitely tell others about the Good News of the love of God we know in the One who created us, saves us and breathes that love in and through our lives.

Will you stand as we sing together the final verse of **Hymn #39, v. 3** *Great Is Thy Faithfulness*.

Let us sing of the amazing, faithful love of our God.

## **INTRODUCE THE APOSTLES' CREED**

Let us stand and confess what we believe. You will find the Apostles' Creed on page 35 at the front of the Glory to God Hymnals. Let us confess our beliefs about the Trinity in these ancient, present-day words!

## **NOTES:**

The Nicene Council did not invent the Trinity, as some people imagine. A full century before the Nicene Council, Tertullian wrote a voluminous explanation and defense of the Trinity and was viewed by his contemporaries as defending the orthodox Christian faith to nonbelievers. A couple of decades before Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria and Irenaeus, bishops at opposite ends of the Mediterranean basin, both taught the Trinity. A half century or more before Irenaeus and Clement, we find Trinitarian teachings in the authentic works of Justin Martyr, who died in 157. At the very beginning of the second century, St. Ignatius, a respected bishop, was martyred in his old age. On his way to his martyrdom, he wrote epistles to the churches along the way, making theological statements that are best understood in the context of Trinitarian theology. Finally, the *Didache*, an ancient manual of church discipline that could possibly date from the middle of the first century, quotes the Trinitarian formula of Matthew 28:19 in its instructions for baptism.

(<http://www.apostolic.net/biblicalstudies/trinhistory.htm>, The Development of the Doctrine of the Trinity, by Jason Dulle, [JasonDullecharter.net](http://JasonDullecharter.net))

Shirley Guthrie, Christian Doctrine, p. 100, "Those early writers were working to show that God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are not separate parts of God, as if we could divide God into thirds. The Father is God; the Son is God; the Spirit is God; all one and the same God expressing God's self simultaneously in different ways.

cf also: SER-13-05-06