

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

May 26, 2024, Trinity Sunday

Psalm 29 (The Message Translation), John 3:1-17

Sermon Series: Come Holy Spirit: Trinity Sunday—Knowing our Creator, Savior and the Spirit in Daily Life!

Four the last four weeks we have been exploring the ways that the Holy Spirit of God moves and breathes in our lives. Today we expand our vision and look at a more complete vision of our God as we talk about the Trinity. But I've found that that can be a conversation that is often as confusing as talking about the Holy Spirit. I really enjoy the Family Circus comics because the author understands children and often places them in church. Bill Keane even wrote one for Trinity Sunday. The children are in the front of the church for the children's sermon. The minister is carefully explaining:

"Children, even though there are three persons of the Trinity: The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, God is One. "

To which Jeffrey, one of the youngest, answers: "I'm three."

My sense is that many of us are a lot closer to Jeffrey's comment than we are to a clear understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity, which states that we know our one God in three ways, or in three persons: the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And while we know God in these three ways, there is still only one God.

If you look for the word Trinity in the Bible, you will not find it there. The doctrine, or beliefs about, the Trinity came out of the early Christian Church's struggle to explain their experiences with God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

The church was working to be faithful to their monotheistic belief, that is the belief that there is only one God.

They wanted to speak against the heresies of the day and clearly state how we understand our one God who comes to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or in a more modern naming of the trinity: as our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

Within 80-100 years of Jesus death and resurrection Christians were writing about the Trinity. ¹ Two of the places we see their early beliefs are in the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed.

"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. ²

This week as I was thinking about the Trinity and how we can talk about our understanding of God without getting so tangled up in theology that we aren't making much sense, I read a quote from a Presbyterian pastor who said:

"The Trinity was...a living experience before it became a doctrine of the church. And it is as a living experience that thousands of Christians realize the Holy Trinity in their lives today without trying to work out the intellectual consequences of their beliefs. (Read, Presbyterian Life, 9/1/65, p. 14)

▪

Another Presbyterian pastor, Fredrick Buechner, put it this way: "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

mean that the mystery beyond us (God the Father), the mystery among us (God the Son), and the mystery within us (God the Holy Spirit) are all the same mystery. Thus, the Trinity is a way of saying something about us and the way we experience God.”

Buechner, Frederick, *Wishful Thinking, A Theological ABC*, New York: Harper and Row, 1973, p. 93.

I love these images: The Trinity is a living experience: The mystery beyond us, the mystery among us and the mystery within us. All of these are experiences of our God who loves us.

I believe that our “living experiences of God” are the best way to talk about the Trinity.

So how is it that you experience God, who Fathers and Mothers us, our Parent, our Creator, “the mystery beyond us” in the world and the people around us?

Growing up in the Pacific Northwest I was blessed with a childhood filled with incredible sights and sounds of nature. I knew God in creation in the crashing of waterfalls of the Columbia River Gorge, the singing of streams, in the scent of evergreen, pine and cedar forests on a warm summer afternoon, and the pounding surf of the Oregon coast. I knew God as a loving Parent and Creator who shaped Mount Hood and Mount St. Helens that were on my horizon giving me a sense of God’s strength and power.

Since moving to Illinois, I’ve come to know and be moved by God’s creativity and gift-giving in all the different ways the Mississippi River looks, 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, egrets and herons.

And we see God’s power to bring growth and change as the green stalks of corn grow up through the summer.

There is the beauty of the wind stirring those fields of corn

All we need to do to know God’s creativity is to look into the faces of those we love. In the diversity 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, our God watches over us and watches out for us, and creates in such beautiful ways!

How is it that you experience Jesus, the Son of God, our Savior, the “mystery that is among us?”

One of my first clear experiences of Jesus in my life happened when I was 10. It was the summer after 5th grade and I was at summer church camp. One night, we had gone on a hay ride on the back of an old farm truck out in the country, Way out on a country road in the middle of nowhere the truck broke down. Luckily our youth pastor and some of the other counselors had brought their guitars. I was at the back of the group looking up into the night sky filled with stars. I was a city kid so that night sky was amazing to me. The campers were all singing James Taylors, *You’ve Got a Friend*. As we sang: “You just call out my name, and you know wherever I am, I’ll come running. I felt Jesus’ love all around me and in me and I knew that I was completely loved by Jesus, and he cared enough for me that he would come running when I needed him. Jesus’ love for me was so real in that moment, as I looked up into the night sky filed with the stars of creation.

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;” “I’ll Fly Away,’ 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’s Supper that Jesus has given to us. It is joyfully humbling and exciting for me that I get to remind you that the living Christ is right there with us as we pass the bread and the cup to each other.

Sharing the communion meal is one of the things I missed greatly while I was away from you. Those first Sundays were really painful for me, because I missed sharing our family meal together.

Your experience of Jesus’ love may come from hearing Jesus speak to you through his words in the Bible. Words such as those found in:

Matthew 11:28-30 Jesus says: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Or the words you’ll hear at funerals from *John 14:1-3* Jesus says: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many mansions. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also."

Or later in *John 14:27* when Jesus says: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

Finally, **how is it that you experience the Holy Spirit, The Comforter, the Advocate and Defender, Helper and Friend, the “mystery that is within us?”**

I have been amazed by the Holy Spirit in times when a friend comes to mind and I think I have to call them right now. When I call them, they are often having a difficult day and really needed someone to listen. Their first sentence is often, “I can’t believe you called me!” The nudges of the Holy Spirit are sometimes gentle but can have powerful consequences.

I knew the Comfort of God’s Holy Spirit through you and my friends when I was so sick with Long Covid, and feeling such despair about what was going to happen to my life as a pastor. God used your words of encouragement in cards and emails to help me feel loved when I was not feeling very lovely or lovable at all.

There were deep valleys in those 18 months and my friends who walked into those valleys with me brought God’s Spirit with them. Their comforting words helped me hear God’s comforting Holy Spirit.

You may know the joy or peace of 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 is in our midst as a church family. In times of great joy, like last Sunday as the beauty of the chimes started and ended worship, and the children helped me act out the first Pentecost.

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.

So, I ask you after these reflections, what are your living experiences of the Trinity, our God who is "the mystery beyond us, the mystery among us and the mystery within us?"

It is by living beloved children of God, it is by living that we have living experiences of the Trinity, our living God who is beyond us, among us and within us.

So, on this Trinity Sunday let us recognize our own living experiences of our God, and let us tell those experiences to each other.

Then let us join together in thanksgiving and praise for our living God of Love, the three in one: the Father, Son and Holy Spirit; our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen

¹ 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) ²Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, p. 100