

Sermon – Unbroken Circle
Scripture: Genesis 1:1-5, Matthew 28:16-20
Sunday, June 6, 2023
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Springfield, Illinois

On this Trinity Sunday, our first scripture reading affirms God as Creator in Genesis 1:1-24. We will limit our reading to verses 1-5 which reference the presence of the wind, the spirit, in God's creative work bringing order out of chaos. Hear now the Holy words of Scripture.

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness God called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day...Amen.

The word "trinity" is not found in the Bible as the doctrine of the Trinity was first articulated in the Nicene Creed around 325 C.E.; however, we see glimpses of it in a few New Testament passages. Today's gospel reading, Matthew 28:16-20, includes the trinitarian baptism formula as the disciples are commissioned by the authority of Christ to be the church. God's trinitarian presence in the church is affirmed. Listen to the holy words of scripture.

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ When they saw Jesus, they worshiped him, but they doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ 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 ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age. Amen.

The title of the sermon "Unbroken Circle"

Text: The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you. II Corinthians 13:13

Let us pray: Holy Triune God, thank you for the wonderful complexity of who you are. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable to you. Amen.

A circle is an endless line, having no beginning and no end, symbolizing eternity and God. Three entwined unbroken circles were among the earliest symbols of the Trinity reminding us that these three, eternal, and unified persons, equal in power and glory, coexist within relationship.

Today is Trinity Sunday, a time to celebrate and honor this rich and complex understanding of God, a time to affirm the dynamic tension between what we know of God and our attempts to formulate and articulate what we know. One danger is to imagine that we do not know about God at all, as though nothing has been disclosed. The other danger is to imagine that

we have the inscrutable character of God fully captured in our formulations. (Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year A pg. 337)

The exploration of the Trinity seems especially timely today as we recognize our high school graduates. As their circles grow in the coming year, life will become more complicated. Existing relationships will change, future relationships will develop, and new knowledge and new experiences will expand their worldview and understanding of God.

The understanding of God as the Trinity grew out of a dilemma faced by the early followers of Christ. They believed in one God. Creator, Holy and wholly other. Yet, following Jesus' death and resurrection, they were convinced that Jesus was truly God in their midst, living among them for a while. As they considered the possibility of God becoming one of them—entering their humanity to be their mentor and Savior—they were deeply touched and yet confused. Was their devotion to Jesus a betrayal of Yahweh?

To compound the dilemma, they also believed God was present with them still, literally inside of them in the gift of the Advocate to empower and sustain them in their daily lives. They believed that the One who created them and redeemed them continued to initiate a relationship in the Holy Spirit ...even as the Spirit breathed life into and hovered watchfully over creation.

Yes, to say that the early Christians were in a dilemma is quite accurate. Their choices were equally undesirable. Do they give up their faith tradition and the synagogue they knew and loved? Or do they deny the experience of this one Jesus who transformed their lives and deepened their understanding of the love of God?

Around 85 C.E. (about 60 years after the first Pentecost) the People of the Way who were the first followers of Christ and a sect within Judaism—were forced to choose. Although they were not initially excluded from the synagogue, rabbinical sages put together a group of benedictions read during the service, and one declared that the followers of Jesus Christ were heretics.

It is because of the tenacity and courage of these early believers of Christ that our understanding of who God is has been so enriched in the doctrine of the Trinity. They refused to deny their personal experience and encounter with the grace of God in Jesus of Nazareth. Likewise, they refused to give up the heart of their Judaea tradition—namely that there is one God.

Out of this time of chaos and confusion was an opportunity for creativity. Even as wisdom and the spirit of God brought forth order out of chaos in the creating of the world, a new way of understanding God was being formed. When there seemed to be only two options, it was suddenly clear there was a third. Why not embrace one God and at the same time celebrate the distinct ways God has made Godself known? Why limit God to one way of being... to one way of expressing Godself... to one way of loving God's people...to one people of God?

Suddenly, a doctrine that was intended to assert the power of God, namely monotheism, became an obstacle to God's creative nature. And what was true then is true today. When we limit God, we limit ourselves. The Trinity recognizes the majesty and mystery of God who is both infinite and intimate, known and unknowable, transcendent and transparent.

When I was in seminary my appreciation for the Trinity deepened in the study of Systematic Theology. It was there I learned that God's very nature is relational. God is defined by the relationship among the three persons, a relationship characterized by unity, equality, and distinction.

Sadly, the doctrine of the Trinity has lost the richness of its original intent to celebrate the dynamic within relationships. When we hear "Father, Son and Holy Spirit," we don't think about the relationship among these three. Yet, this was precisely what the Early Christians thought. They celebrated the intimacy and partnership of the three persons of the Godhead, unique and separate, same in substance, equal in power and glory, and they marveled at the way they complemented one another as the Holy Trinity.

What is true in the dynamic of the relationships within the Trinity is also true in our relationships with one another. When we recognize the uniqueness of each human being created in the image of God, equal in power and glory, and when we celebrate the diversity of gifts among us and all the ways we complement one another, like unending, interlocking unbroken circles, we create a community which reflects the Triune God.

May we have the same courage and creativity of those who came before us and not limit our God or ourselves. May we recognize the uniqueness of each human being created in the image of God and ensure the inherent value and dignity of all people. May we always celebrate the beauty and complexity of relationships-- among the Three Persons in our Triune God and within our community. Amen.