

Trinity: Diversity in Unity
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Scripture: Genesis 18:1-7, John 15:12-17, 26-27

Hymns: StJ 16, HWB 120

Good morning, and greetings from Nutana Park Mennonite Church. I appreciate the chance to worship with you once again today.

Our most recent worship series at Nutana focused on different names for God, the many ways we name God in our Scriptures, hymns, prayers, and experiences. These included God as Healer, Woman Wisdom, I AM who I AM, *El Shaddai* (courtesy of Joe Heikman), Dove, Spirit, Fire, Trinity. Our God is One, but our God has many names. Within this list, there is one that is quite familiar to our Christian ears: God as Trinity, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as Three-in-One, as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer (or in simpler terms, Creator, Saviour, and Guide). My son Simon is 6 years old, and when I've thought about how to explain the Trinity to him, I came up with the different aspects of our identities. So I'm a sister, a daughter, a pastor, a mother – but these are all part of who I am. That's a bit like the Trinity. Or there is also St. Patrick's lovely image of the clover to explain the triune nature of God. Just as the clover has three parts to each leaf, there are these three main names for our One God.

We in the Mennonite church aren't strict Trinitarians, but we do take the Trinity seriously. We often speak to God as Father, Son, and Spirit in our prayers, and sing to God as Trinity in our hymns. We baptize people in the name of the Father, Son, and

Holy Spirit and Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. But I don't know if we take it quite as far as it's been taken previously in Christian history.

Let me explain. Have you ever wondered about the difference between the Eastern Orthodox church and the Roman Catholic church? Why do we have these two ancient branches of the Christian tradition – the Eastern and the Western? Would you believe a large part of it has to do with the Trinity? That's right. If it weren't for different understandings of the Trinity, that church split never would have happened in the year 1054 C.E. So what was the big controversy, you might ask? Well – get ready for it, this is big – the Eastern Orthodox church argued that the Holy Spirit was sent by God the Father alone. And the Western church argued that the Holy Spirit was sent by God the Father and God the Son, Jesus Christ. That's it. That's (part of) what the big controversy rested on, these different understandings of where the Holy Spirit comes from or proceeds from, of divine relationships within the Trinity. And people cared about this enough to debate it for several hundred years before splitting the church into East and West in what's sometimes called the Great Schism of 1054.¹ This led to people calling each other heretics and excommunicating each other. Can you believe it? Does that seem worth it?

Now, before we get too smug about all of this, let's remember that the Mennonite church has split into many, many different factions over the course of our 500 year history, and in some cases, over no less insignificant points of belief. Now, I've studied this stuff. I'm familiar with some of the finer points of Catholic doctrine on the Trinity, and could throw out words like “hypostatic union” and “perichoresis,” and make everyone's

¹ You can read a bit more about it here: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Filioque>

eyes glaze over.² I'm going to spare you that (you're welcome) and turn instead to Anne Lamott's sentiment in her book, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*.³ She knows that it's possible to get caught up in all the complicated logic and technical details of historical theology and doctrines like the Trinity, but she's more interested in what our faith has to do with our daily lives. How do we live this stuff out? What difference does it make in our everyday? She came to the realization that:

“I didn't need to understand the hypostatic unity of the Trinity; I just needed to turn my life over to whoever came up with redwood trees.”

In other words, faith isn't about figuring out the technical details of the inner working of the Trinity. Understanding all of those complex Greek and Latin words doesn't make someone a more faithful person. Rather, it's about following a call to embrace the mystery of the Divine, who desires to be in relationship with us. So what difference does naming our God as Trinity make for our daily lives? Does it make a difference? I hope it does.

But before I go any further, I have to name another aspect of the Trinity that throws a wrench in this whole question. I struggled a bit with finding biblical passages for my sermon today because the Trinity isn't really a biblical notion. Or rather, it's biblically-based, but it's sort of between the lines. There is a tradition of identifying the Trinity in some fairly interesting (and sometimes unlikely!) places within Scripture. One is at the beginning of Creation in the book of Genesis, when God says, “Let us make humankind in our image...” (Gen. 1:26). The plural there – the “us” and “our image” –

² Briefly put, the hypostatic union is the union of humanity and divinity in Jesus – he is fully human and fully divine. Perichoresis is the mutual indwelling love between the persons of the Trinity.

³ Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith* (Riverhead Books, 2006).

has been taken by some Christian interpreters as a reference to God as Three-in-One. Then there is the story in Genesis 18 of the three visitors to Abraham and Sarah, which we heard as one of our Scripture passages for this morning. There again, Christian interpreters at various points in history have read the three mysterious visitors as the Trinity, come to bring the message of good news to Abraham and Sarah: that they will have a son, Isaac, in their old age, and their descendants will be a blessing. Here again, Christians have read the Trinity back into the Hebrew Scriptures, tracing the understanding of God as Triune into a time long before the historical Jesus of Nazareth. In the New Testament, things start to become a bit more concrete in terms of being able to see the Trinity start to develop as a name for God. We have Jesus' commission to baptize people in the name of the Trinity - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 28. We also have, as we heard, the Gospel of John's more mystical discussions of the Trinity as Jesus speaks about his own relationship to God the Father or Creator and the Spirit or Advocate who is to come (John 15) – a Spirit who of course also appears at his baptism in the Jordan River and at Pentecost (Acts 2). In several of the apostle Paul's letters to the early churches, he also greets them in the name of the Trinity (1 Cor., Gal., Heb.), but other times only names two of the persons of the Trinity (e.g., Romans, 2 Cor., etc.). So we can see from this that there is a kind of rough outline of the Trinity in the Bible, but it's not yet an established doctrine the way we think of it today. And the development of the formula of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit didn't happen until the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds were written, some 200-300 years after Jesus' time. So it's not really biblical, but the Bible lays the groundwork for the Trinity.

One article I read even went so far as to suggest that the Trinity is not a biblical belief so it should be thrown out – it no longer has relevance for us at all, this person argued. I think that would be a little hasty of us, maybe a little too extreme. Though there are ways of understanding the Trinity that make it lose its connection to our lived faith – like (ahem) focusing too much on the technicalities of who proceeded from whom – it remains a long-standing, life-giving way of speaking about the Divine. Just because it was not fully developed in the biblical stories doesn't mean it's useless to us – much of our theology and practice is rooted in the Bible, but has evolved in important ways to meet us where we are in our time and place. Faith and theology are living, organic things that develop over time, informed by our experiences of and encounters with the Divine in our time and place.

Whenever I think of the Trinity, I think of my late uncle, Jim Reimer, who was a Mennonite theologian and professor at Conrad Grebel College in Ontario. The Trinity was really central for him – I'd call him an enthusiastic Trinitarian – as were the early creeds of Christianity (The Nicene Creed, the Apostles' Creed, etc.). For him, these were the foundation of Christian faith and life – without these creeds as a guide, with the Trinity at their centre, he thought our notions of God become too small. For Mennonites in particular, he was concerned that we often reduce God to Jesus alone, forgetting about God the Creator and God the Spirit. He termed this "Jesusology" – the worship of Jesus alone, meaning, in his words, "that the human, historical 'Jesus of Nazareth' is understood to be the sum total of God. When Jesus of Nazareth is worshipped in this sense, believers are in danger of idolatry."⁴ Now I don't know if I completely agree with

⁴ See A. James Reimer, "Towards a Theocentric Christology," in *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora/Waterloo, ON: Herald, 2001), 272.

him on all fronts - I'm not terribly impressed by the male-only language of classical theology that he viewed as foundational, for example. God is also beyond an ancient patriarchal worldview in which women and non-binary people were not considered fully human! But his point is an important one: when we reduce God to only one image or one name or one understanding of who God is, we risk believing in a God who is too small. We mistake one part for the whole. That is why we need the diversity of the Trinity and the diversity of names for God: it's a reminder that God is always more than we can imagine as human beings. God is divine mystery.

Even when it comes to the Trinity, our understanding can be reductive if we only focus on the male language of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That's why I appreciate the more gender-neutral Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, or theologian Sallie McFague's re-imagining of the Trinity as Mother, Lover, and Friend, which reflects the three kinds of love: *agape* (selfless), *eros* (romantic), and *philia* (friendship). If we are to truly preserve the mystery of God, it's important to conceive of God in both male and female imagery, as well as animal and inanimate imagery – think God as Mother Bear, Dove, or Rock. This is what the Bible does, and the Trinity is a kind of shorthand for this theological notion – in the Trinity, God is both one and three, both diverse and united. This is not something for us to pick apart and try to define using exact Greek or Latin terms (sorry, Great Schism people). Rather, it's a way of speaking about something that is ultimately a mystery.

And I don't know about you, but I personally find that comforting. I don't have to have everything about the Trinity figured out – I can be in relationship with God, knowing that there is room in God's self for my way of experiencing God, a way that is

life-giving for me, as well as for each of us. It comes back to Anne Lamott's wonderful statement: "I didn't need to understand the hypostatic unity of the Trinity; I just needed to turn my life over to whoever came up with redwood trees." God as Creator is most meaningful to her, and so she experiences God in redwood trees; she feels it's meaningful to worship the God who created redwood trees. That is a name for God that speaks to her experience and season of life.

Along similar lines, Catholic theologian Elizabeth Johnson gives us three evocative ways of speaking about God's Trinitarian nature. She presents three images of the Trinity drawn from nature. These are the Trinity as light, water, and a living plant.

1. She says, "If the great, unknowable mystery of God is pictured as the glowing sun, and God incarnate as a ray of that same light streaming to the earth (Christ the sunbeam), then Spirit is the point of light that actually arrives and affects the earth with warmth and energy. And it is all the one light."
2. "Again, the transcendent God is like an upwelling spring of water, and a river that flows outward from this source, and the irrigation channel where the water meets and moistens the earth (Spirit). And it is all the one water."
3. "Yet again, the triune God is like a plant with its root, shoot, and fruit: deep, invisible root, green stem reaching into the world, and flower that opens to spread beauty and fragrance and to fructify the earth with fruit and seed (Spirit). And it is all the one living plant."⁵

I find these to be really beautiful illustrations of both diversity and unity within God: they're such clear pictures of how God contains difference within Godself, but works together for the good of the world, in all kinds of life-giving ways. And while these may seem like new or unfamiliar images, they actually originate in early Christianity, not to mention the life and ministry of a certain man who was called the Light of the World,

⁵ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit: 1993 Madeleva Lecture in Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 41.

who offered Living Water, and who called himself the True Vine. Maybe this stuff IS biblical after all!

I want to close with just one more image of the Trinity. Here we are, the week after the Pride Parade here in Saskatoon – an event that celebrates diversity and unity. It was such a joy to take part in that parade together with some of you and members of Osler Mennonite Church, to walk and sing together in the midst of a celebration of diversity. To me, that's also what the church is all about: it's about being welcoming to all, recognizing that we all bring different experiences, identities, and gifts to the Body of Christ, and that as a loving community, we not only tolerate, but celebrate our differences as we join together to worship and live out the Way of God, who is Love. It's Paul's old image of the one body and many members in the Body of Christ.

One of the hymns we just sang today perhaps says it best, with words from the Iona Community in Scotland. Verse 4 of "Praise with Joy the World's Creator" (Sing the Journey #16) goes like this:

"Praise the Maker, Christ, and Spirit, one God in community,
calling Christians to embody oneness and diversity.
This the world shall see reflected: God is One and One in Three."

Here we have the image of the Trinity as a community, holding together oneness and diversity. This means that we are not only in God's image as individuals, when the church is scattered and we are going about our daily lives, but that when we gather as a community, we are in the image of God as Trinity. The Trinity is Many gathered into One, a Community of love and interdependence. That, to me, is a wonderfully profound image of the Trinity that very much resonates with – even enriches – our lives today.

Thanks be to God, the Divine Community. AMEN