

First Trinity Lutheran Church  
June 3, 2006  
Text: John 16:12-15

### **Dancing with the Trinity**

Today is Trinity Sunday in the life of the Church and therefore I am going to preach a sermon on the doctrine of the Trinity. I don't preach doctrinal sermons that often. For you who are "first time visitors," I want you to know that this is not a "normal" Sunday morning sermon.

In the life of the Church, we have special Sundays. These special Sundays are intended to remember specific historic events in the life of Christ. Such as Easter Sunday which remembers the resurrection of Jesus. Such as Pentecost Sunday which remembers when the Holy Spirit came and lived within the first Christians. But today is the only Sunday in the year, which is dedicated to a doctrine, the doctrine of the Trinity.

By Trinity, we mean to say that God is three in one. That is, there is, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. God is fully God when God created and still creates the universe. God is fully God when God lived and still lives in the presence of Jesus. God is fully God when God lived and still lives in the presence of the Holy Spirit who lives in our hearts today. These are not three gods but one God who has three different persona or three different dimensions or three different qualities.

The Trinity is a very important doctrine. For the most part worship services in all mainline denominations begin with the Trinitarian formula. The worship services begin with these sacred words: "In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen." As those words are spoken, the pastor makes the sign of the cross. Similarly, all worship services in the mainline denominations conclude with the same ancient formula, "In the name of the Father and on the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." For twenty centuries, worship services have begun and ended in the name of the Triune God.

Also, life itself begins and ends with those sacred words of the Trinitarian formula, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That is, at baptism of infants we baptize in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” And at the end of life when we die and they put our casket into the ground or our ashes into a vault, these sacred words are spoken again. “Earth to earth, ashes to ashes and dust to dust, in sure and certain hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.” In other words, life begins with baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and ends at our grave in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. These words are bookends for the beginning and ending of our lives here on earth.

The doctrine of the Trinity is also written into the constitution of First Trinity Lutheran Church and as you can tell, Trinity is part of our namesake. Our constitution says “We believe that God has called us together as a family, we come together in faith to worship and sing praises to our Triune God.

The Trinity is one of the most important doctrines of the Church. Now, there are a lot of people today who don't have much time for doctrine. Such people are often into spirituality. They like phrases such as “I am a spiritual person. I have a spiritual relationship with Jesus Christ. I believe in Jesus and that is enough for me. I don't need doctrines.”

Such attitudes of spirituality without doctrine are not wise. For example, every car has a chassis. What is a car without a chassis? You have to have a chassis to on which to put the fenders, the engine and wheels. You need to have something, which holds the whole car together, and that is the chassis. Or, what is my body without a skeleton? Without a skeleton, the knees would be flopping around along with the legs and arms. You need to have a skeleton within the human body for that human body to stand up on its own two feet and legs. I believe that doctrine is like a chassis, which holds the car together. I believe that doctrine is like the skeleton within the human body that holds the body together and allows us to stand up.

There are twenty-three Bible verses about the Trinity in the New Testament. You will have to trust me on this because we are not going to study these passages today. Rather I would like to take another track and look at how this doctrine of the Trinity came into being.

We begin with a man by the name of Tertullian. Tertullian lived from the year 150 to 220 CE. He lived in the city of Carthage, which was in North Africa. Tertullian was a very brilliant lawyer and he was converted in his adulthood to Christ and Christianity. He was converted by none other than Augustine, one of the greatest of early church leaders.

Tertullian gave us important words. Tertullian gave us the word, “persona,” that God is three different persona or auras of personhood. Tertullian said that God had the persona of the Father, the persona of the Son and the persona of the Spirit. People have personas and so does God. A persona is a quality of personhood, an aura, an ambience. Tertullian also gave us the word, “trinitas.” We don’t have the word, “trinitas,” in the Bible. “Trinitas” was a Latin word that was used one hundred years after the Bible was written in Greek. Tertullian also gave us the word, “sacramentum.” “Sacramentum” means mystery. That God had three persona, three dimensions, three auras; this too could not be intellectually understood. This was a mystery.

Now, let us briefly examine the three ancient creeds of the church. Just about all of us have heard or read the Apostle’s Creed. It is called the Apostle’s creed not because the twelve Apostles’ wrote it, but because this creed was named after the Apostles. The Apostle’s Creed was the baptismal creed of the church. For nineteen hundred years of church history, every time there was a baptism, the church members recited the Apostle’s Creed. When we have a baptism in our church we say the Apostle’s Creed. “I believe in God, the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.” “I believe in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord.” Then the third article. “I believe in the Holy Spirit.” This is a Trinitarian Creed.

Next we have the Nicene Creed. This creed was written in the year 325 AD. In 325 there were two men by the names of Athanasius and Arius. Athanasius said that the God who

created the heavens and the earth became a real live human being in the person of Jesus. Jesus was fully human and fully God at the same time. But Arias said. “O no. This human body that suffered and died on the cross could not be fully God. God would never allow himself to suffer so immeasurably. A God, who is fully God, would never allow himself to be crucified. Jesus was a kind of God but was not fully God.” So Arius and Athanasius had this big debate. The result of this debate is the Nicene Creed. “We believe in one God, the Father, the almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.” Closely look at the next lines: “We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God of true God, begotten not made, of one being with the Father (of one substance with the Father). Through him, all things were made, for us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven by the power of the Spirit and was made man.” When you read these lines about Christ, you know that the early church believed that Jesus Christ was fully God. ... That was the argument. There were many people who were saying that Jesus Christ was not fully God. That was a big theological argument in those days.

Finally we have the Athanasian Creed. This creed was not written by Athanasias but was named after him. Athanasias could not have written this creed because he died three hundred years earlier. This creed was named after Athanasias who wrote the Nicene Creed. The argument in this creed was whether or not the Holy Spirit was fully God. This creed confesses that the same God who created the heavens and the earth and the same God who lived in the body, heart and mind of Jesus is the same God who is fully present in the Holy Spirit. At this point in history, the argument was between Rome and Constantinople and you have the beginning of the Greek Orthodox Church. The issue is whether or not the Holy Spirit was as fully as God the Father and God the Son. This became the division between the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Church. In this Athanasian Creed, it says very clearly that the Holy Spirit is fully God.

So these are the three main creeds of the church. All the mainline Christians believe in three creeds: The Apostle's Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. All three of these creeds are part of all Roman Catholic churches, all Lutheran and Episcopalian churches, all Presbyterian churches, all Methodist churches, etc. These are all creedal churches and creedal denominations. We are a Trinitarian Church. We believe that God is the creator of the universe and it still creating today. We believe that God was fully present in the person of Jesus Christ. We also believe that the Holy Spirit is also fully God.

I would not be honest with you if I didn't say that this Trinity stuff is hard to understand much less explain. Even committed Christians find this hard. The Trinity is for us something like the roundness—or near roundness—of the earth. We accept that the earth is round, but we tend not to experience the earth as round. Most of the time we behave as though the earth were flat. To experience the earth as round requires us to have a larger perspective. We need to look at a globe, or see a photo of our planet taken from space, or even go out into space ourselves. Otherwise, the earth is so large, and we are so small, that we cannot deeply appreciate the true shape of this planet. To experience the truth of the Trinity, we need the equivalent of a globe, or a satellite photo, or a trip into space.

Various images are available but today seems a good time to examine a particular image that has a special appeal: God the Trinity as God the Dance. The dance in question is not a ballroom dance where couples travel the floor with arms around each other. It is not a rock dance, where the partnership of couples is not apparent, and each dancer has great freedom to perform. The dance that offers this image of divine Trinity is a circle dance—Father, Son, and Spirit with hands joined in a circle, engaged in that dance which is their life together, a dance without beginning and without end, a dance which is joy beyond all telling.

In this holy dance called Trinity, the partners do not predate the dance, nor does the dance predate the partners; but both the partners and the dance are eternal. In this holy dance called

Trinity each partner cannot be confused with the others, nor is one partner of greater worth than another. Instead, each partner plays a specific role, and the three of them move in rhythm, showing the utmost courtesy and affection and grace.

The Trinity is unending, joyous dance, yet the miracle is that the circle breaks open, and the Son and Spirit, still holding hands with the Father, extend their other hands to us, inviting us into the circle, drawing us into the dance, that we may become their partners, participants in their life.

When you go to wedding receptions and observe the dancers, you usually find that they show different degrees of proficiency. Some glide along with flawless form. Others move with small, timid steps. A few of them are downright clumsy. What is saddest of all are not the dancers who lack skill, but the many who never get up at all, people who could dance but decide they will not.

Our life works the same way. A dance is going on. That dance is the living God, the holy Trinity. We are invited to join that dance. The Spirit is eager to help us move. The Son reaches out his wounded hand. The Father wants us to see his face.

No hesitancy should hold us back. The problem with human life is not bad dancing, but that some of us choose not to dance at all. What finally matters is not how well we dance, but that we take a risk, get up, and go out on the floor; that we join the circle and move to the music, the rhythm of the Trinity. Amen