
On Trinity Sunday, We Lean Into Relationship

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Trinity Sunday - Year A

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

So many of us priests and preachers begin our sermons every week with that phrase: “In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

It is a statement of God as Trinity. One God in Three Persons. Some of us use other trinitarian formulas: Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier. It could even be Mother, Daughter, and Holy Breath. The classical formula is “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” That phrase, or vow, places our sermon within the doctrine, and the spirit, of Christian tradition.

Of course, I am sometimes hesitant to use the word, “doctrine,” to describe the sense of God as Three. This notion of God as Three is more than just a dusty doctrine, or some dogma to argue about, and certainly not some test of orthodoxy.

No, this understanding of God as Three, a Trinity of Persons, is a reality. It is a spiritual reality that goes beyond Christianity, or any religion. And it has a critical importance today. It is a deep contribution in our present time of unrest.

For, as we know, our city and country, already stressed by the pandemic quarantine, are now under the stress of social unrest and protest. And many of us have been rightly reminded of the sin and effect and racism.

We need relationship. We need the renewal and restoration of relationship. Or, in many cases, we need the birth and beginning of new relationship!

And “relationship,” my friends, is exactly what the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is about. If there is any one thing I want to preach this morning, it is this seven-word sentence: “The Holy Trinity is about Holy Relationship.”

I used to say that today, Trinity Sunday, is the only feast day of the Christian Church that is not based upon an event, like the birth of Jesus, or the Resurrection of Christ, or the Descent of the Holy Spirit. This feast day, I said, is about a doctrine, not an event.

But, you know what? This doctrine is an event! It is not a merely a clever set of words that we use to test our orthodoxy.

When we say that God is Trinity, we are really saying that “God is Relationship.” God, our mighty all-powerful God, does not exist alone. Even God exists with others. Even God, the Holy One of God, lives as relationship. We might even say that God is the Event of Relationship!

It has been fun and clever, over the years and centuries, to develop analogies of how God can be one and yet three. Some, like St. Patrick, have said God is like a shamrock, a three-leafed clover: one plant with three leaves. Or the triune God is like a triangle. Or, for the more scientific-minded, God is like ice, water, and steam: all one substance, H₂O, but existing in three different forms.

And, some of you know my favorite Trinitarian analogy: the Neopolitan Ice Cream Theory of the Trinity! One ice cream in three delicious flavors!

But the real question of today's feast day might be: So what? What difference does the Trinity make? What difference does it make how we define God? Should we be worried if someone does not get the doctrine right?

This morning, I want to say, "Yes; it does make a difference." Our definition of God can liberate us, or it can oppress us. Our definition of God can exalt us, or it can make us look like fools.

If we believe that God sits high above us, on some judgment seat, pulling strings and ordering angels around, and acting impulsively and capriciously – well, the chances are that we ourselves will act like that. If we think that God just sits around getting angry and upset all the time – well, the chances are that we will act like that.

But, if we believe that God actually loves people – well, the chances are that we ourselves will love people, too. And, if we believe that God lives in holy and healthy relationship – well, the chances are that we ourselves will try to live in holy and healthy relationship.

God actually exists in loving relationship. We claim that God is not just one person, living alone and imperialistically. And this loving relationship can just as easily be described as Mother, Daughter, Breath, as it can be described as Father, Son, Spirit. Sure, Jesus was male, but the Eternal Word, Divine Wisdom, eternally begotten, is both masculine and feminine.

The point is that the persons of the Godhead – Father, Son, and Spirit — respect and honor each other. They love and point to each other. They live in ever-giving relationship. If we human beings, then, are made in the image of God, then we are made for relationship, too. Our image is not complete unless we are in relationship with other persons.

And, in this day and time, we need loving relationship, and mutually honoring relationship, more than anything. Maybe we need such relationship because we are living alone. Maybe we need such relationship because our households have become impatient and angry.

And, maybe we need such relationship because racism has sickened and divided us. If we believe in, and follow, a God who exists as relationship, then we too are meant to be seeking the relationship of others, seeing to learn from the other – taking the point of view of blacks in this country, for instance – and understanding and honoring the perspective of our black sisters and brothers.

Whatever God-given race we are, living in relationship means being able, and willing, to learn from people who are different from us.

Yes, it's hard. It's especially hard if we believe ours is the only perspective that counts, or the only image, that counts. That would be like saying the Father has no need of the Son, or the Spirit has no need of the Father.

The Holy Trinity of God does need each other. God needs the incarnation of the Son on earth. The Son needs the power of Holy Spirit. The various people of God, of all races and nations, need one another for completeness, just as God the Father needs the Son who needs the Spirit. We are incomplete without each other, just as God is incomplete if God is not the Trinity.

So, that's why this Sunday, Trinity Sunday, in the church year is so important. This Sunday is our attempt to do the impossible, to try to make sense about God. We try to say something definitive and descriptive about a God who is above absolute definition and comprehension.

But good words about God do have an effect. Good doctrines, and even dogmas, about God have an effect; they inspire and release us to love each other more dearly.

Another way of describing the Holy Trinity as Holy Relationship, is to say that the Holy Trinity of God is dance. Some people use the Greek word, *perichoresis*, to describe it; the trinity is a "dancing around!" It is the giving and taking, and pulling and swaying, of good people dancing with each other.

And we have seen that beautiful doctrine of the trinity in these past days, even in the midst of anger and violence elsewhere. I have seen police officers hugging protesters, and protesters hugging police officers. I have seen good people laughing and honoring each other, even kneeling toward each other in the midst of protests. I have heard people singing "Lean on Me" together. Dancing around.

That is holy relationship. That is the Holy Trinity of God. The Holy Trinity is good doctrine and good spirit. Because good doctrine is always about good spirit! Yes, let's lean on each other. Let's lean into holy relationship.

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Mother, Daughter, and Holy Breath. Creator, Redeemer, and Transformer. In the name of God, in the name of Holy Relationship,

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

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