

Rev. Clover Reuter Beal
Proverbs 8; Romans 5:1-5; John 15:26-27;16:12-15
“The Divine Circle Dance”
MBPC
5.29.16

Trinity Sunday annually falls the week after Pentecost. The liturgical calendar intentionally makes room for us to contemplate the theological conundrum of “God in three persons, the blessed Trinity.”

But today is not the Sunday after Pentecost. Today is the Sunday after Zoo Sunday-- a new Montview liturgical tradition. I heard author, Fr. Richard Rohr, speak last week about the Trinity and its implications for one’s spiritual life, so I decided I didn’t want to let a year go by.

The doctrine of “The mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,” hasn’t made the theological greatest hits list since about the fifth century. Even St. Augustine said he only wrote about the Trinity because he HAD to write something about it. Then of course, He wrote a tome on the subject.

The first of the early church fathers to be recorded using the word "Trinity" was in the late 2nd century. Theophilus of Antioch defined the Trinity as ‘God, His Word (*Logos*) and His Wisdom (*Sophia*)’. In the stunning Proverbs 8 reading we heard the voice of the personified expression of wisdom (*Sophia*) or the Spirit present and rejoicing at the beginning of all creation.

Fans of the film, *The Matrix*, will remember the trinity (small T) of the three central characters: Morpheus (the Father), Neo (the Son) and Trinity (the Spirit). That might be the most airtime the Trinity has received in recent popular culture.

How many of us give much thought to the Trinity in our daily lives. Are we even cognizant of the use of the formula “Father, Son and Holy Spirit” in benedictions, or during baptisms as we sprinkle holy water on the heads of children or adults, or when we sing the doxology?

Most of us pay little attention to doctrinal debates. Let the scholars battle it out, while the rest of us try figure out what it even means to call ourselves Christians in an ever-changing and challenging world. That keeps us plenty occupied—we don’t need to borrow trouble.

About a 1000 years ago, theologians took this topic very seriously and the Eastern and Western church split hairs over it—and then literally split. As feminist literary scholar, bell hooks said, “Language is a place of struggle.” We all know that when you talk about God; a place of struggle it can quickly become.

The Western church viewed “God in three persons” through a more rational and logical interpretive lens.

The Eastern Church on the other hand had a higher comfort level with paradox and mystery.

In Japanese Zen Buddhism, the teachers use something called a koan as a teaching method. A koan is a story, question, or paradoxical statement used by the masters to teach their students in order that the student might abandon their dependence upon reason. A koan contains qualities that are inaccessible to rational understanding but may be accessible by intuition.

A famous koan is, "Two hands clap and there is a sound; what is the sound of one hand clapping?"

A koan forces the student to slow down, to go deeper, to be contemplative.

Jesus used his own types of koans to teach about the reign of God. Jesus’ parables were more often bewildering than instructive. His stories often left his hearers frustrated, or scratching their heads, or stymied.

Contemplating the Trinity is more like contemplating a Zen koan.

Using our minds only to understand its complexity is not adequate; the Trinity is not a metaphysical puzzle, math equation or riddle to solve.

What Trinitarian language—like all good theology-- seeks to do is beckon us to go deeper and to strip us of over-confidence in our intellect. We contemplate the Trinity so that we might draw out an expansive understanding of God.

The Catholic mystic Carlo Carretto said, “When we try to speak about the triune God we sound like babbling children. Yet, we must still try being confident that we ARE children of God doing our best to understand.”

This is when the language of poetry is significantly helpful. Metaphor opens up our minds and hearts. Poetry goes to our guts, our intuitions.

Now here’s something really cool so listen up. Early church theologians borrowed the beautiful expression for the Trinity from the Greek word *Perichoresis* that means: **circle dance**. Nearly 2000 years ago they described what goes on between the Father (parent), Son (child) and Holy Spirit (wisdom) as a divine circle dance! A divine dancing with the stars. What did the church fathers mean by using *Perichoresis* and how does it bear out for our earthy-spiritual lives?

First, what can a Circle say about God?

The circle is a mutual, egalitarian, non-hierarchical form. All partners have access to power. No one sits above the other because they are interdependent and in a mutual relationship.

The icon on the front of the bulletin is called *The Holy Trinity*, by a fourteenth century Russian artist named Andrei Rublev (1360-1430). The three persons of God are sitting at table together. No one is above the other, they are similar in form, but distinct in features; they are obviously in fellowship, sharing a meal.

So too the church is to be formed and to function like a circle than a hierarchy. All persons have access to power and to leadership. The Spirit was poured out on all flesh at Pentecost, and "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us," Paul said. All people are children of the Spirit and the circle is drawn to include everyone; no one is to be left outside the Spirit's circle.

Second, what can the Dance say about God?

My husband, Tim, and I went to a pretty conservative Christian college that didn't allow dancing. We signed a covenant that we wouldn't drink, smoke or dance. There was another trinity at play in that policy: the trinity of *fear, shame and guilt*. But humans are *bodies, minds and spirits*. Like water to cracks in the pavement, it's nearly impossible to keep young people's bodies from dancing. Instead we rented space off campus and called them "functions."

Dance is universal. All cultures have some sort of dance unique to itself. Dance can be revolutionary. It expresses community at its best-- hands touching, feet moving, bodies swaying and twirling. Dancers are in each other's personal space.

Dance is about relationship and relationality. The Universe is about relationship and relationality. God is a God of relationship and radical relationality.

So God is not way up or out there, distant from us. God is up-close and personal.

Throughout the Bible, God isn't good at respecting personal space. Remember Jacob wrestling with God—so close he could feel God's breath on his face. God is closer to us than our own breath. I bet God's favorite dance is the tango--cheek to cheek.

God is supreme joy and happiness. Therefore Dance is joy-filled. It's impossible not to smile when you're dancing a polka or fox trot, country line dancing or a Scottish caleigh.

Finally what can dynamic motion tell us about God?

Faith and love are not static enterprises. There is flow and movement. When a couple marries, it would be absurd to think that their marriage begins and ends on their wedding day. Long time committed couples know well, relationships deepen and grow over the years. Loving one another means we are continually challenged to keep moving in the dance of love.

One of Tim's and my favorite pieces by Picasso is the familiar drawing of the circle dance called *La Ronde*. The different colored figures are holding hands as they circle the Spirit-dove. Picasso understood *Perichoresis*. The Spirit of JOY flows through the circle with energy, passion and interdependence. In the diversity of hands clasped and held high there is beauty and strength.

What does the circle image of the Trinity mean for 21st century Christians?

The church should function as a circle, not hierarchical in structure.

All persons are invited into the circle.

The Spirit is WISE and WILD, and she goes where she desires. With delight she pours her love out upon whomever God wills. The church doesn't control where God's grace will fall.

The Trinity is not an intellectual problem to solve but a profound Mystery that should bend the knee of our hearts in humility.

The language of the Trinity is about the swirling of mutual and unconditional Love and Truth amongst God in three persons. This gives us the standard for the swirling love and inter-dependency between all God's creatures.

Our human destiny seems to be to dance together. It's how God intends us ALL to live and to survive. It is in the circle dance of the Three in One that we find God in God's fullness. We then can find our true selves; and discover that REJOICING is to be the response for the life we've been given.

So, for God's sake, let's dance! Amen.

JOHN 15.26²⁶When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. ²⁷You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning. ^{16.12}“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

ROMANS 5 1 Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. 3And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5and hope does not disappoint us, *because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.* 232

Proverbs 8:1-4;22-31

8Does not wisdom call,
and does not understanding raise her voice?
2On the heights, beside the way,
at the crossroads she takes her stand;
3beside the gates in front of the town,
at the entrance of the portals she cries out:
4“To you, O people, I call,
and my cry is to all that live.

22The Lord created me at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of long ago.
23Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.
24When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.
25Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was brought forth—
26when he had not yet made earth and fields,
or the world’s first bits of soil.
27When he established the heavens, I was there,
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
28when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,
29when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
30then I was beside him, like a master worker;
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,
31rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the human race.