

## Follow the Dancing God

On the Sunday after Pentecost each year, the Episcopal Church honors one of our most fundamental beliefs. As the Book of Common Prayer states, the Feast of Trinity Sunday celebrates “the one and equal glory” of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, “in Trinity of Persons and in Unity of Being.” We testify to our belief in the Trinity in the Nicene Creed each week, declaring our faith in the Father Almighty, his only begotten Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit who proceeds from them both. The Creed was first adopted as a statement of Christian belief by the Council of Nicaea in 325 C.E. and, with some amendments, has continued in use ever since. Wouldn’t you think we’d have the Trinity figured out by now? Well, no.

In seminary, it was my privilege to study with one of the world’s foremost systematic theologians, Dr. Katherine Sonderegger. Saint Kate, as her students like to call her, has written two-thirds of a rich, almost mystical trilogy on the nature of God and is hard at work on the final volume. In her second book, *The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity: Processions and Persons*, she recognizes the challenges facing a Trinity Sunday preacher. Dr. Sonderegger writes, “[n]o one seeks to preach on Trinity Sunday, so the story goes; to the curate, the visiting pastor, the seminarian falls this unwanted duty. Trinity is technical, explanations run afoul of careful distinctions right out of the gate, analogies court heresy at first use, and no one is the wiser when the sermon limps to the end.” Inspired by her teachings, I’ll try to do better than that. Our understanding of the Trinity is complex and evolving, though, still debated almost seventeen hundred years after the Council of Nicaea. We’re not going to resolve the Mystery of the Trinity this morning, but let’s try to shed at least some light on the nature of our triune God.

As Alister E. McGrath explains in his *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, “The distinctively Christian doctrine of [the Trinity] took shape in response to a question about the

identity of Christ.” Nothing like Jesus’s death and resurrection had ever happened before, and early Christians struggled to make sense of them. If Jesus was God, then what did that say about the Creator, his Father? Did we suddenly have two gods, like Zeus and Apollo? And was the Holy Spirit, whom Hebrew scholars understood to be the life-giving breath of the Father, also the separate divine being whom Jesus called the Advocate? Jewish monotheism collided with Greek paganism and philosophy, generating furious debate. Eventually, the early Church fathers agreed that the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are all made of the same divine “substance,” a concept that classical Greek calls *homoousios* (ὁμοούσιος). United by substance, the three remain distinct individuals, or *personae*. In his 2021 sermon, “You Will See Yourself,” the Reverend Kirk Alan Kubicek likens the three Persons of the Trinity to the masks an ancient Greek actor might wear to play different characters onstage. The idea of one essence uniting three different persons is an elegant concept, but it leaves plenty of room for debate about what it actually means.

There are many references to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in Scripture, but the Bible doesn’t explicitly confirm the trinitarian nature of our God. Christianity arrived at trinitarianism mostly by divine revelation. As Archbishop Rowan Williams observes in his book *On Christian Theology*, we wouldn’t even know to refer to our God as God if God himself hadn’t given us permission to do so. We’re able to understand God to the extent God reveals Godself to us and, to a lesser extent, by what we can infer from observing God’s work in the world. When we look for God’s work, we see creation, salvation, and revelation. From that, we deduce that God is a holy Trinity that creates us, redeems us, and reveals divine truth to us.

There’s spiritual danger in reasoning from creation, salvation, and revelation though, and Dr. Sonderegger puts her finger right on it. We owe infinite gratitude to the Father for Creation, to Jesus for our salvation, and to the Holy Spirit for revealing to us as much sacred truth as our

limited minds can grasp. But when we focus exclusively on what God has done and continues to do for us, we wrongly place ourselves at the center of our faith. Dr. Sonderegger writes, “[t]he Holy Scriptures contain all things necessary for our salvation, yes. But they are not *exhausted* in it, nor are the other elements of Scripture mere stage-setting or *preparatio* to the drama of our redemption. Rather we sinners must be moved, quietly but firmly, out of the living center of the Christian religion. Only God stands there.” Otherwise, we risk joining St. Ignatius of Loyola and other luminaries of the church in the well-intentioned but mistaken belief that “[a]ll other beings and objects that surround us on the earth were created for the benefit of [humankind] and to be useful to [us] as a means to” our eternal salvation. Yes, Creation supports our redemption, but it is not exhausted by that task, however sacred it might be. Creation belongs to God, not to us, and it almost certainly serves divine purposes far beyond whatever we can imagine.

Trinity isn’t about God’s actions toward humanity. It’s about God’s holiness and aseity, a metaphysical term for God’s self-generated existence outside of the Creation of which we’re a part. God’s triune nature is a sacred paradox that we can never fully comprehend but, as the Reverend Peter Strimer observed in his 2012 “Trinity Sunday” sermon, struggling with paradox is good for us, strengthening our human minds. There can be no more noble pursuit than striving to better understand and venerate our Almighty God, even if our limited human capacities prevent us from seeing much beyond the blessings that the Trinity showers upon us.

Our readings this morning give us a glimpse of the three Persons of the Trinity: the Father, immense and resplendent on his sapphire throne; the Son, teaching a puzzled Pharisee that rebirth in the Spirit is essential for us to receive God’s priceless gifts of salvation and eternal life; the Holy Spirit leading us into kinship with the Son as the Father’s adopted children. But don’t for a moment imagine the Trinity as a motionless tableau. Each engages with the others in

an eternal, joyous circle of movement that the earliest Christians described as *perichoresis* (περιχώρησις), a sacred dance of mutual love. Father Richard Rohr's book, *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation*, sees the Trinity's *perichoresis* as proof that "the foundational nature of reality is relational; everything is in relationship with everything else." He assures us that the Divine Dance is not a closed circle; even as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit eternally circle and intertwine, they reach out and invite us to join in their sacred, loving dance.

On his blog *Walking with Giants*, lay minister Jonathan Mason disputes the philological claims that Bible scholars make about *perichoresis*. Mason asserts that *perichoresis* means "indwelling," so Trinitarian theology shouldn't be based on dance at all. Respectfully, I disagree. The image of the Divine Dance persists regardless of the vocabulary behind it because it helps us envision the dynamic, loving interaction between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It also allows us to imagine how we might be welcomed into their embrace. We can't fully understand our triune God, but by God's grace we know what it is to be invited to dance.

People are sometimes reluctant to dance, afraid they'll be judged if they miss a step or awkwardly move off the beat. It feels safer to stand on the wall and critique those brave enough to take the floor. The mystery of the Trinity provides endless opportunity for argument, but I think God prefers us to stop quibbling and join in the dance. As medieval theologian Thomas à Kempis wrote, "What good does it do you if you dispute loftily about the Trinity, but lack humility and therefore displease the Trinity? ... if you knew the whole of the Bible by heart, along with all the definitions of the philosophers, what good would this be without grace and love?" The Divine Dance joyfully expresses God's holy love that creates, redeems, and sustains not only a fallen humanity, but all of Creation. Beyond a certain point, ours is not to reason why; ours is to put down our intellectual pride, kick up our heels, and follow our dancing God. Amen.