

A Divine Community of Love

**A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on June 12, 2022 (Trinity Sunday)
Friendship Presbyterian Church**

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it ...

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known. (John 1:1-5, 9-18 NRSV)

Last Sunday we celebrated *Pentecost*, that day each year that we revel in the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church – empowering it for ministry and service. Its significance and power is obvious, and its story – told in the 2nd chapter of Acts – is one of the most memorable in all scripture ... which may make *this Sunday's* focus seem dry and dull by comparison: Trinity Sunday – that *first Sunday after Pentecost* when we liturgize upon that deep divine mystery of "God in three persons," the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Three in One, and One in Three.

Yikes! I suspect that most of us have been taught this notion all our lives, and yet are no closer to understanding it than when we first learned of it.

I know that when I think about it, my mind just naturally goes to that old Dr. Seuss book "Oh, the Thinks You Can Think!" You have probably heard of it. It's good whimsical fun that encourages us to *think* ... to spread our imagination far and wide, to consider all the magnificent thinks we can think ... going beyond just the things we can see and touch, and allowing our minds to try to conceive the inconceivable. He ends with the memorable words, "Think left and think right and think low and think high. Oh, the thinks you can think up if only you try!"

Have you ever had the idea that our orthodox Christian doctrine of the Trinity is kind of like that? Like one of those thinks that got think because some theologians long ago thought it

would be fun to think up a think no one could really think? I've had that think ... thought ... before. Perhaps you have too.

Now, the Bible itself *does* bear witness to this great mystery concerning God ... Jesus the Son of God, praying to God whom he called his Father, and then promising God the Holy Spirit after his departure ... but it *doesn't* explain exactly how these three are all related, and yet are all *one God*. And so, you can't derive it merely by stringing together some proof texts. In fact, it is the product of three or four *centuries* of experience, reflection, and debate in the Church. It's a considered response to the question: How is God to be identified in the light of the history of Jesus Christ and the transforming presence of his Spirit?

It was at the Council of Nicaea in the year 325 when the doctrine was hammered out in the form that we have it today, which underlies so much of our Christian language and liturgy. Again: God in three persons, and yet only one God ... Three in one, one in three ... Oh, the thinks you can think up if only you try!

Perhaps you will be relieved to learn that I will, in fact, *not* try to explain the paradox, to unravel the mystery. There is a good bit more that could be said about the biblical and historical foundations of it and the how and why behind the doctrine being shaped into the form we know it, but that's for an adult Sunday School series, not for a Sunday morning sermon. Besides, I would imagine these pews are not comfortable to fall asleep on!

But, what *do* we do with it, if anything? Now there are some who would readily consign it to the dustbin of history. But I would say, not so fast. Perhaps the doctrine of the Trinity is at least a needed reminder of the *profound mystery* of God.

NEWS FLASH: God is not your buddy, or your co-pilot, or the Man Upstairs. As the prophet Isaiah said, God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts; God's ways are higher than our ways. It shouldn't surprise us that the God who created all the wonders of this world is far, far beyond our understanding, and at least sometimes it's important to remember that. This may *seem* obvious, but unfortunately, it isn't.

There are many out there who at least act like they understand God *perfectly* well and don't hesitate to tell others so. Their confidence about the divine will swells in the face of the deep contradictions of human existence. I can only imagine how nice it would be to have that kind of confidence ... to have the mystery of God neatly figured out, the Lord of All conveniently wrapped up in a tight little conceptual box.

The idea of the Trinity is one powerful way of reminding us that we'll never fully grasp the Truth, that the mystery we call God will always, forever, be out ahead of us.

And how could it be otherwise? If we want to appreciate this, all we need do is go outside on a clear night, and look above our heads, and consider the grandness of the Creation. Remember what the psalmist wrote:

*O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the Heavens ... (Psalm 8:1)*

And remember elsewhere the psalmist singing of this unfathomable majesty of God manifest in the works of Creation:

*The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no
speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; and yet their voice goes out
through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. (Psalm 19:1-4a)*

And that was in *ancient* times. Today, we have the Hubble space telescope ... we have electron microscopes and supercolliders ... we have Carl Sagan's and Neil DeGrasse Tyson's *Cosmos* series! What we *now* can experience as we contemplate these heavens and this world is a Creation far grander, far more evocative of awe and reverence, than anything we have ever known, more than the psalmist *could* have known.

We can know better than ever before how much we *don't* know – how in the face of what stretches out before us, how much *any* language we then use for the *Creator* of all this is at best a pointer that falls short. For our poor words would point to a Reality that will not be contained by words, or definitions – or thinks! – of our imagination.

Perhaps those bearded Church Fathers – even way back in the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th centuries – were on to something with that “think” of the Trinity – with words pointing to a Mystery beyond words ... forever beyond our full grasp.

But fortunately, this truth about God is *not* the end of the story. The most basic claim of the Christian faith is that if you want to know the unknowable ... if you want to experience the mystery of Ultimate Reality ... then look for it in the sacred depths of Love.

I have always been a fan of the late great actor Peter O'Toole. Some of you might remember him in a little-known 1985 romantic comedy (not for children!) called *Creator*. O'Toole plays Dr. Harry Wolper, a charming, eccentric Nobel Prize-winning biologist who lives in search of what he calls “The Big Picture” – Ultimate Reality – the *answer* to the riddle of existence. In pursuit of this, Harry has a second lab in his backyard, and to stock it, he deftly (and hilariously) steals equipment, funds, and lab assistants from his university, although not without raising suspicions.

His partner in crime is his young graduate assistant named Boris who, early in the movie, begins pursuit of a beautiful young woman named Barbara Spencer, whose love – with tremendous effort and good laughs – he finally wins.

But then tragedy strikes. Harry's backyard lab – with all the equipment “borrowed” from the university – is discovered by a suspicious, snooping fellow professor and is shut down ... 30 years of work destroyed. Harry is spared prosecution for theft and misuse of funds in exchange for agreeing to retire quietly to an emeritus position at an obscure nearby college. And with this turn, Boris loses his assistantship and bitterly blames Harry for roping him into a hopeless dream.

But just when things couldn't get any worse, they *do*: Boris' true love Barbara suddenly collapses into unconsciousness, with almost no warning – the victim of a previously undiagnosed neurological condition. She descends into a coma, and is kept breathing on a ventilator. The powers that be recommend unplugging her life-support systems, but a heartbroken and distraught Boris is desperate to keep her alive.

In his desperation, Boris even reaches out to Harry, with whom he had that falling out, asking for any help at all. Harry answers by coming to the hospital, and he pulls some strings to buy some time, and then comes to Barbara's bedside and sees Boris.

His eyes full of compassion, Harry encourages Boris to stay with her, speak to her, read to her, as if she could hear and understand every word he was saying. And that's what he does. For hours, for days, Boris never leaves her side, never giving up hope that he will get her back. And yet, all the medical indications continue to come up empty, and time is running out.

In the wonderful climactic scene, Harry returns, knowing that soon, hospital officials would be coming to unplug life support. Boris is at the end of his rope, and he makes a confession: “You know, Harry, I'm *still* trying to find the Big Picture, but I keep missing it because I am so in love with Barbara that nothing else matters.”

And Harry responds, “What makes you think you're missing it?”

The New Testament uses an uncommon Greek word to describe this mystery of Love, this Love that is of God: *Agapē* – a self-giving, self-sacrificing Love –

- Love like that of Parents who birth us into being and choose us before we could ever choose them ...
- Love like that of a brother who sacrifices himself to save us ...
- Love like the spirit tie that binds hearts together into a life-sustaining, everlasting fellowship.

When such a Love is experienced, it is unforgettable. In its multiple dimensions, it quietly draws us into the community that is the Divine Life itself – birthing us, gracing us, healing us, and setting us free to live and to be.

And so, we are brought back full circle. The same Trinitarian faith which would have us remember that the reality of God is a “Think” forever *beyond* us, would also have us rejoice in

the *presence* of that God in our very midst ... the God who calls us into a kind of divine community, an expression of the richness and depth of his own life.

When we voice our praise to God – the One whom we call Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – we praise a divine Mystery –

that Mystery by whom we were loved into existence,
that Mystery which embraces us with crucified arms,
that Mystery which binds us together with one another, forever.

And so, we sing with elation,

*Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty!
All Thy works shall praise Thy name in earth and sky and sea!
Holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty –
God in three persons, blessed Trinity!*

To the glory of God! Amen.