



LAKESWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Rev. Terence A. Lucarelli

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*TRINITY SUNDAY ... THREE HANDS CLAPPING*

John 16:5-15

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I heard about a young man who left for college. Apparently his mother had packed his suitcases, so when he started to put his clothes away in his new dorm room he discovered two long, narrow pieces of cloth among the shirts, socks and underwear. These two pieces of cloth were neatly folded and ironed. At first the young man didn't know what they were, but when he looked at the design of the cloth, he soon recognized the pattern ... these were the strings from his mother's favorite apron. She had cut them off for him.



Today is designated Trinity Sunday in the Christian Calendar. It follows, very naturally, Pentecost Sunday. God decided we needed a different form of visitation and direction ... through the Spirit. And so, we've grown up hearing the word "Trinity." It's a Christian word. When people outside the church ask us to explain the Trinity, or to help them understand the Trinity, well, it is a tough thing to do, because in reality we have a hard time understanding it ourselves. Bottom line is: The Trinity can only be experienced.

Our passage of scripture this morning reminds us that Jesus let all of us know that he couldn't tell us everything, that he would send Another that would journey with us as we continue to grow and experience our relationship with our God. The Bible also reminds us that when we were young Christians we were fed with milk, but as we become more mature and grow in a deeper relationship with God, God will then begin to feed us with meat that will require some chewing and digestion. So, in some ways, Christians understand the Trinity as a process where God is saying, "You've been fed light food long enough. It's time for you to chew on some really deep Christian realities. Therefore, I'm cutting the apron strings. I'm calling you to start a wonderful journey ... an experiential journey with me, your God."



What I did in preparation for this sermon is, I took out my Concordance that has all the words that appear in the Bible. In the thing you can find where words appear and how many times ... and I looked for the word "Trinity." Guess what? I couldn't find it ... because it's not a word that appears anywhere in the Bible.

So, what I did next was grab my Bible Dictionary. It's a book that explains all the words that appear in the Bible, and so I was hoping that maybe the word "Trinity" might show up in it. But again, since "Trinity" doesn't exist anywhere in the Bible, it wasn't explained or talked about in my Bible Dictionary.

So, where to next? Well, with a little more exploration, I discovered that the word "Trinity" was first used by an early theologian named Tertullian around 200 A.D. or 200 C.E. (that's "Common Era" or "Christian Era" depending upon your preference) ... He wanted to explain this idea of "three Persons, one Substance" that they had been kicking around for a while, and so, the Latin word, "tinitas" or our "Trinity" seemed the logical choice.

In Scripture there are references to God as "Father-Creator," and references to Jesus, "The Son," and to the Spirit as the "Counselor." But at no point does it use the word "Trinity."

In our passage from John we can see an indication of the concept ... all three are acknowledged. But a very clear reference to the make up of the Trinity is found in Mathew's gospel 28:19:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

And so again, what I discovered was that the early church needed a word to talk about the three manifestations of God that are expressed throughout Scripture ... they chose the word “Trinity.”



A pastor preached on the Trinity and after church went to the car to head home. Stuffed underneath the windshield wiper blade was a candy bar wrapper with some words scribbled on it. It was a Three Musketeers. The words, “All for one and one for three.”

“Trinity” is a Christian word. It really cannot be explained to someone who’s not a Follower of the Way. And for those of us who profess being on a journey with God ... well, it is an experience. It is a fact of life that cannot be easily outlined or explained. The Trinity really is the way God visits us as we experience that reality. However, there’s just no way we can write an analytical description of the experience.



I think that what the Trinity does for us is it keeps the church in balance. What do I mean by that? Well, all of us have had times in our spiritual lives when we’ve gotten out of balance. I grew up in a church where we really only talked about Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. On other occasions I’ve been in churches where God was discussed only as Creator and Parent. Through the years I’ve been in churches and Para-church organizations that emphasized the Holy Spirit ... where they speak in tongues and give you the feeling that if you don’t experience the Spirit like they do, well then you’re just not a Christian.

And so, the Trinity constantly reminds us to remember that God is One; yet ...

1. God is also revealed as Creating Parent ... the Earth-Maker.
2. God is also personified as Redeeming Son ... the Pain-Bearer.
3. God is also experienced as Ever Present Spirit ... the Life-Giver.

There’s no doubt that each of us could talk about how we have experienced God in our lives in these three different ways. The experiences have been real, but to transmit that understanding as a piece of knowledge to someone else is not required. Tertullian, whom I mentioned earlier, explained the Trinity in a metaphor, God the Father he described as “a deep root, the Son as the shoot that breaks forth into the world, and the Spirit as that which spreads beauty and fragrance.” That is about all you and I can expect to be able to do .... “spread beauty and fragrance” in a world so desperate for such things.

I believe God wants us to realize that deep thought, deep convictions and a growing faith are necessary ... but God has cut the apron strings. We are called to grow in our faith, not simplistically, but through an ongoing relationship with the God we know ... or I guess I should say the God we experience ... because God has given us three ways to do just that ... EXPERIENCE.



In one of theologian, Robert Capon’s books, he says that when human beings try to describe God we are like a bunch of oysters trying to describe a ballerina. God is utterly beyond us. We don’t have the equipment to understand, but God, by God’s grace, lets us experience that presence ... and we call what we experience ... TRINITY.



There have been attempts to explain God. The prophet Isaiah tried in a Scripture passage from chapter 6, verses 1 and 2:

“I saw the Lord, sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above

him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew."

John, the writer of Revelation, tried to give a description in chapter 4 verses 2 and 3: "At once I was in the Spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne! And the one seated there looks like jasper and cornelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald."

There's no question that all of us, in the midst of our Christian journey, have encountered and experienced God in a variety of ways. Some days, God might be a judge. Other days, God's the shepherd. Some days, God appears to us as a whirlwind, blowing our certainties away, and calling us into new awarenesses. On some occasions we can experience God as a brooding hen sheltering us under her wings. On other days, God is a monarch who comes to us as ruler and king. Other times, God visits us as teacher, challenger, helper, or often we have met God in the face of a stranger. God can be the lover, the adversary, the "yes" and the "no."

When we experience God in contradictory ways ... well, that simply becomes OUR problem, not God's. There is no question that God can come to us in varied and many forms. As Christians we summarize this reality by using the word "Trinity." God is One. However, there are no limits to the ways we can experience God, receiving new insights along the way as we journey with the God WE KNOW through the Trinity.

So, in the midst of our awe and glimpses of God, we experience God as a Creating Parent ... the Earth-Maker.

In the midst of mystery and the reality of love we see God as a Redeeming Savior ... the Pain-Bearer.

Then, God chooses to come to EACH OF US through love, busting apart our logic and little descriptions and formulas in the presence of God's exploding Spirit ... the Life-Giver.



Many of us have had the privilege of traveling to different countries and experiencing different cultures. It would be a little ridiculous, would it not, to say after we've visited for a week, a month or even a year, that we understand the culture of the people, their race, or their tribe? The reality is, we weren't born into the culture; we haven't lived in that country all our lives ... so there's no way we can say we understand. What we can do is to joyfully celebrate the experiences we've had through the interaction with cultures, races, languages that are different from our own. These experiences have changed our lives. We can FEEL the EXPERIENCE of the journey.

In like fashion, the invitation is extended to each of us to join God on a journey in living. It's clear we CAN'T understand God completely ... no way! What we CAN affirm is that we have experienced the presence of God in our living.

The best the early church could do, and the best we can do today, is to speak of that experience as "Trinity."



With all of that said, there is one thing we can KNOW unequivocally, and the best way to share this with you is through an old story told about the twentieth century's greatest theologian, Karl Barth. Barth was on a speaking tour of the United States. On college campuses all across this country, he was drawing huge crowds to hear his very complex answers to the questions of life and the reality of God.

When he was speaking at Princeton University, the great Nassau Hall was packed with faculty, students, and visitors who came to hear Karl Barth speak. During the question and answer period, one student asked, "Dr. Barth, may I ask you a personal question?"

Dr. Barth smiled and said, "Yes, you may ask anything."

The student then asked, "Dr. Barth, you are a very educated man. What is the greatest truth you have ever learned?"

Dr. Barth bowed his head, thinking for a moment about how he would respond. Then, he raised his head and looked out at the student who asked the question and he said, "The greatest truth I ever learned was at my mother's knee: 'Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.'"

So, on this Trinity Sunday, God looks at YOU and ME ... those of us who have been a part of the church for many years and God says, "I've cut the apron strings. I'm now going to feed you on the meat of deeper spiritual realities. I can do this and you can do this, because you KNOW you are loved!"

As members of Lakewood Presbyterian Church, let's enjoy the journey together as the relationship grows and matures. Through the gift of the Trinity, I invite you to experience the fullness of God's grace.

In the journey and in our travels together, maybe we'll hear and experience, for the first time, in its grand fullness, the Trinity: "THREE HANDS CLAPPING."

Amen and Amen.