

Trinity Sunday
“Holy Spirit Help”
John 16:12-16
June 12, 2022
Rev. Joy W. Laughridge

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¹² ‘I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³ When 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. ¹⁴ He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵ All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁶ ‘A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me.’

Throughout the year, the Church marks and celebrates a variety of special days and usually on these days we remember a particular event that is part of the story of God’s work to bring salvation to humankind and to restore Creation. We just had one of those days last week when we celebrated Pentecost which commemorates the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the disciples and the beginning of the church’s ministry and mission. Pentecost is followed by another special day that the church celebrates today called Trinity Sunday. Trinity Sunday is different than the other festival days on the church calendar because on this day, instead of celebrating and remembering an *event* that bears witness to God’s *work* in the world, we are reminded of a *doctrine* that describes what Scripture has revealed about *who* God is.

When I say the doctrine describes what Scripture has revealed about who God is, I do not mean that there is any particular chapter and verse that plainly states that God exists as one God in three persons. There isn’t a chapter or verse like that, but the Bible does bear witness to one God who is present and at work in three ways. The early church fathers came up with ways of trying to describe this and gave us language saying things like God is one in “essence” or “substance” but also exists as three distinct “persons.” Centuries after the early church fathers clarified and preserved the doctrine of the Trinity for the church, we sing the words to the hymn that we sang this morning, “Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty...God in three Persons, blessed Trinity,” and we confess our faith in the Triune God when we say the Apostle’s Creed, and we baptize and welcome new members into the church in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, yet if you were to find yourself in a conversation with someone who said to you, “tell me how that one God in three persons thing works,” you might find yourself unwittingly perpetuating a heresy condemned by the church fathers known as modalism by saying, “well, it’s kind of like water is all H₂O but it can be in the form of a liquid, solid, or gas.” That’s called modalism because it suggests that like water can only be in one of those forms at one time, God can only function in one mode, or as one person, at a time. That doesn’t quite fit with the witness of Scripture, though, that reveals that the one God is *always* the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit at the same time. It kind of hurts your brain to think about it, which is why instead of even trying to tell someone who asks how the three in one and one in three thing works, you might just say, “well, it’s a mystery.”

At this point you might be thinking, “this should be a short sermon” because what else is there to say about a theological mystery that we can’t explain, right? God is three in one and one in three. It’s very confusing, but by faith we know it to be true. It is true that there isn’t much that I could say today to unravel the mystery or solve the puzzle of exactly how God exists and works as three persons in one, but trying to solve the puzzle isn’t really the point after all. Instead, as theologian Shirley Guthrie has said, the doctrine of the Trinity, while not perfect and not fully adequate to describe who God is, does provide “the uniquely biblical-Christian understanding of who God is, what God is like, how and where God is at work in the world, what God thinks about us human beings, does for us, requires of us, promises us.” We

want to know who God is, and what God is doing, and what it has to do with us, and when we know these things it leads to a response on our part. That is how the doctrine becomes practical for us. Today, in light of the day- Trinity Sunday- and the Gospel reading for today from John, I want to talk about how the doctrine of the Trinity helps us to know God as transcendent – meaning that God is above, and beyond, and supreme, and other – and also how it helps us to know God as immanent - meaning that God is close and accessible and intimately involved in what is happening both within us and all around us.

I'll start with transcendence because this is really what is behind Trinity Sunday. It isn't a day that was set apart to celebrate a doctrine. It is a day that was set apart as a day to *worship* the God who is described by the doctrine. Of course, every Sunday is a day to worship the Triune God- we don't only acknowledge God as three in one and one in three on Trinity Sunday, but having a day like today does call our attention to the fact that God is indeed mysterious, and incomprehensible, and awesome, and the only right response to that reality is humble and heartfelt adoration and worship directed toward Almighty God. We may not think that we need to be reminded of the fact that God is not like us, and that God is beyond our ability to fully describe and comprehend, but the reality seems to be that humankind is prone to the temptation to make God in our image rather than remembering that it is we who are made in God's image. When this happens, our concept of God has a way of shrinking, and becoming manageable, and all of a sudden our theology becomes superior to the theology of others, and we seem to have perfect clarity about what God is thinking, and what God wants to think our neighbor needs to do. We begin to conceive of God as a figure who sounds and acts a lot like some kind of cosmic version of ourselves. The writer Anne Lamott famously said, "You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do." One of the simplest and most practical things that the doctrine of the Trinity does is to help us avoid falling into that trap because it reminds us that God is wholly other and beyond the limits of both our human understanding and our control. There are simply things about God that we do not and cannot know, and yet, the Trinity also gives us the assurance that this God who is holy, and other, and transcendent is also the God we can know deeply and intimately even as we are known by God.

Jesus is the person in the Trinity who we think of when we think of God's self-revelation and God's work to bring salvation and restoration to us. We can know God because Jesus came to make Jesus known, and we experience the indwelling presence and power of God through the Holy Spirit. As we think about the works that we associate with God, and Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, it seems like they are each doing three different things and while each does have a unique ministry, Scripture shows that when one is working all are working together. The work that the Father does, is also the work of the Son and the Holy Spirit. The work of the Son, is also the work of the Father and the Spirit. The work of the Spirit is also the work of the Father and the Son. I said earlier that there is not one chapter and verse in Scripture that specifically describes God as one in three and three in one, and yet the Bible does bear witness to the relationship and the unity that I've just described. We see it in our reading from the Gospel of John this morning.

We have returned to the Upper Room and the night of Jesus's arrest a few times since Easter, and this Scripture takes us there again this morning. Jesus is talking to the disciples about the Holy Spirit who will come to them after he leaves them and returns to the Father. Jesus tells that the Spirit will come and guide them into all truth, and then he says that the Spirit will only speak what the Spirit hears indicating that there won't be any conflict or disagreement between what the Spirit says and what Jesus has to say. Then Jesus describes how the Spirit will take from Jesus what is his, and that what belongs to Jesus comes from God. All three persons, communicating a unified message, with, and among, and through each other - and then extending and sharing what exists within the communion and community of the three with the disciples.

Part of what Jesus promised on that night was that the disciples would learn and understand more later. They weren't ready to hear or understand everything about what would happen to Jesus, or the

meaning of it all, or what they would be called on to do after he had been crucified, risen, and then ascended back into heaven. They would learn more later, and he promised that the Spirit would be the one who would tell them everything that they would need to know. The Spirit wouldn't just be telling them *something* though. The Spirit would tell them what Jesus wanted them to know, and Jesus wanted them to know what the Father wanted him to know. It was a promise that they would have a guide and a helper, but it was also a promise that they would experience intimacy and fellowship with God. The Holy Spirit would come to them and as the Holy Spirit taught, and lead, and helped them, it would be Jesus who they knew as Lord, and the Father who they knew as God, who would be leading them, and teaching them, and helping them.

While it is hard to get our brains around the concept of the Trinity, it is equally mysterious and remarkable that we have been given the gift and the ability to be in relationship with Almighty God, the Sovereign and powerful maker of heaven and earth, but that is the truth. What Jesus promised to the disciples is a promise for us, too. That doesn't mean that Almighty God the Creator simply put breath in our lungs and then placed us in the world to do our thing while watching from a distance – like winding up a toy and then just letting it go around the playroom floor without any further involvement. It means that God has chosen to come close enough to make a home in our hearts and from there, God the Spirit speaks, and guides, and helps us.

Though we have been given this remarkable gift, how easily we are tempted to get out of step with the Spirit who is God. This doesn't happen within the fellowship of the Trinity- the Son doesn't disagree with the Father and go his own way. The Spirit doesn't say, "I've got a better idea." Jesus doesn't say, "I'm doing this with or without you two." We, on the other hand, sometimes struggle to trust, and struggle to agree with what we hear the Spirit saying, and when we do, we miss out on our God-given opportunity to join in on the joyful fellowship and loving relationship that God enjoys within Godself and offers to share with us. We miss out on the joy and the peace that could be ours. Maybe fear creeps in. Maybe it's our pride, but God gives grace to help us turn from those things. Each day and in each moment we can turn back and listen again to God who is trustworthy and faithful and with us to help us as we seek to truly know God even as we are known by God.

The reality and the mystery of God the three in one is good news for us today and always. It is hard to understand, and something that we can't fully understand, and yet it helps us. It compels us to worship God who is above and beyond us because God is above and beyond us, but it also gives us the comfort of knowing that we can know and be known by God in a real and personal way. The proper response to that good news is also worship and a renewed commitment to listen and obey as God leads us into all truth and joyful communion with God and each other. Amen.