

Matthew 28:16-20

¹⁶Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

When you pray, do you ever think about who you pray to? Does it ever change? Do you relate to an immanent God who is right here with you, closer to you than even your own breath; or, do you want a transcendent God - full of mystery, powerful, the one who breathes across the face of the waters. The one who ordered all of creation?

When Jesus taught us to pray, he said, Pray like this...Our Father...

Does that mean that when we pray, we are always supposed to start out praying, Our Father???

Today is Trinity Sunday, the day when we look at God in Three Persons, as we sang in the beloved Hymn, Holy, Holy, Holy. And while we may never fully understand the Trinity, it is good to reflect on how we relate to the Trinity personally. When I was a child, I prayed to Jesus. A human Jesus/friend Jesus. Who walked the face of the earth. A Jesus who could understand my own little hurts/suffering.

God was just too big, too powerful. I learned about the Big O's in Confirmation. Do you know what I'm talking about? The big O's that spoke of God's Omnipotence, Omnipresence, and Omniscience. All Powerful, All Knowing, All Present God. That was a little too much God for me.

When I was in Jr. High and High School, it was the time of the charismatic movement in the early 80's. I adopted a way of praying and relating to the Holy Spirit. Over the next 10 years I started noticing the synchronicity of life events. Learning that there are never co-incidences, that they are God-incidences and giving credit to the Holy Spirit in my life.

Somewhere in my 30's I found God again in my prayer life - the unfathomable, unnamable God of mystery. And I began to embrace the big O's in my life once again, although I still wrestle with a God who is All Powerful, All Present, and All Knowing who chooses not to intervene when humanity goes astray, committing harmful acts against one another.

In Seminary, I began to put language to my understanding of the Trinity, and of course, the more I learned about theology, the more confused I became, and the more I realized I had so much more to learn. I read the famous German Theologian Paul Tillich- who I felt talked in circles - who described God as "the Ground of my Being". And, Marcus

Borg, who refers to God as - the MORE, the one in whom we live and move and have our being.

So how did this understanding of Trinity come about? Early Christians believed in one God, but they began to experience this one God in three particular ways. Elizabeth Johnson says: *First, early Christians experienced God as **beyond them**, “as utterly transcendent.” They recognized that the fullness of God is beyond language, beyond knowledge, and beyond experience.*

*Early Christians also experienced God as **with them**, “as present historically in the person of Jesus.” This became known as the Incarnation: Jesus embodied the ways of God in his earthly life. Over time, he became known by some as Jesus the Christ. Followers saw the ways of God clearly in his life,*

*They also experienced God as **within them**, “as present in the Spirit within their community.” So, although there was a transcendent aspect of God that would always be beyond their experience and even after Jesus was no longer physically with them, early Christians still experienced the immanence – the closeness – of God that is, as Wren writes, “closer yet than breathing.” They called this aspect of God “Spirit.” As Christians continued to experience God in these three ways, they began to talk about God in a threefold way. In 2 Cor 11:13 Paul offers a familiar three-part benediction that reflects a threefold experience of God by early Christians: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all”.*

The word ‘Trinity’ never actually appears in the NT and there is no doctrine of the Trinity listed in the NT. But it remains a central teaching of the church. It **took at least 300 years after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus before Christians were able to articulate a doctrine of the Trinity**. During those 3 centuries, there were other diverse ways that Christians understood their experiences with God besides the threefold pattern of the trinity that eventually became orthodox. There were bitter disputes among rival Christian groups about various ways to understand God. There were different factions arguing for the doctrine they believed to be correct. In 325, Emperor Constantine called together a Council at a city called Nicea (NW Turkey). The Nicene Creed was adopted in the face of the a controversy that began with Arius, a Libyan preacher. He had declared that although Jesus was divine, God had actually created him, and "there was a time when he was not," Jesus was only a man, not true God. This made Jesus less than God and contradicted the doctrine of the Trinity. Arius's teaching provoked a serious crisis. The Nicene Creed of 325 explicitly affirms the divinity of Jesus, and that he was begotten, not created. The words of the Nicene Creed, highlight the fact that Jesus Christ is true God. It describes Jesus as “*God from God, Light from light; true God from true God... of one being with the Father.*” It also focused heavily on the role of the HS.

The purpose of the creed was to act as a ruler for “correct belief”. Acceptance or rejection of a creed distinguished believers of a particular doctrine. Although the Trinitarian camp received a majority of the votes at the 4th century Ecumenical Councils,

minority Christian groups, who lost the vote, did not disappear. And, even among the majority, there were diverse interpretations of the orthodox creeds.

What is interesting about our denominational history is that John Wesley deleted the Creeds from the Church of England's Articles of Religion from services to be used in Methodist gatherings in N. America, using instead the Apostles Creed. He did not want the new American church to be beholden to creeds that could be used to divide people more than to unite them in common cause with Christ.

How do we find language and creeds that serve to unite us, rather than divide us? We can start by looking at our own personal experience of God in our lives, and share that, rather than argue about correct belief/orthodox doctrine. When it comes to talking about God, all we have is metaphor. There are limits of our human language. Scripture itself has many names for God, and we call God by many names because no one name for God can capture the fullness of God. All of our words, our concepts, our images, are approximations of who God is, but can't contain or fully explain the essence of God.

Early Christians did their best to reflect theologically about their experience of God from the limits of their time and place. But today our challenge is the same as it has been for people of faith in every age. Over the centuries, people have played with language to describe the Trinity. The most popular version, is Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Many Christians today, find Limiting ourselves to an exclusively masculine formulation (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) is an inadequate reflection of our 21st century experience. But other versions have emerged through the years - the United Church of Christ uses Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer in some of its hymnody. I have also heard God/Word/Wisdom. These are metaphors for a God who interacts and intersects with and permeates our physical world.

The bottom line for me is that reflecting on the Trinity teaches me about God, and who God is. That truth is *relationship*. If we believe in the Trinity, we believe in a God who is in constant relationship. They are collaborative; interdependent; one. One of the best metaphors for the Trinity that I've ever heard is the one by St. Augustine, in the 4th century wrote a book consisting of 20 different attempts at alternative Trinitarian language, says that in the end, the Trinity are best described as the Lover, the Beloved, and the Love. God is the Lover and Jesus is the Beloved. The Spirit is Love: manifestation of love between God/Lover & Christ/Beloved. God is not just *in* relationship; God *is* relationship.

If we are made in God's image, then it follows that we, too, are designed to be in constant loving relationship. Every loving relationship you've ever had in your life is a divine echo of that first loving relationship in which God has been engaged since all eternity. God is not a God of isolation. The point of our lives as humans, as Christians, as the Church is always the same: *coming together*. So on this day, let us not get bogged down with the details of our theology. Instead, let us be content simply to love one another, for Love is the very Spirit of God.

God of heaven and earth, before the foundation of the universe and the beginning of time you are the triune God: Author of creation, eternal Word of salvation, life-giving Spirit of wisdom. Guide us to all truth by your Spirit, that we may proclaim all that Christ has revealed and rejoice in the glory he shares with us. Glory and praise to you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.