**God as Community: Trinity Sunday**

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**NPMC – May 30, 2021**

*Scripture: Genesis 18:1-8, Matthew 3:13-17*

*Hymns: StJ 16, HWB 120, HWB 77*

***Genesis 18:1-8 (NRSV)***

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaksof Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. 2He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. 3He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. 4Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. 5Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.” So they said, “Do as you have said.” 6And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” 7Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. 8Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

***Matthew 3:13-17***

13Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. 14John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” 15But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. 16And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

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There’s a cartoon that my cousin shares every year around Holy Week. It’s of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane – normally a very sombre scene. But in the cartoon, Jesus is saying, “Are you there, Dad? It’s me, you.” That’s right – it’s a joke about the Trinity! When it comes to Christian beliefs, the Trinity is one of the more confusing ones, as I’ve learned when trying to explain it to my kids. So God is one, but also three persons at the same time. No, there aren’t three Gods. It’s like God has three faces or names, or three ways that we experience and understand God. But God is ultimately a mystery beyond our human understanding. Does that make sense?

The Bible, to be frank, is also not super helpful when it comes to explaining the Trinity. We have passages that speak of God as Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit – including the ones for today. But there’s no passage that really explains the Trinity, and the word itself isn’t found in the Bible at all. It was a belief that emerged after biblical times, during the early centuries of the church. You can find it in the creeds or confessions of faith like the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed, which begins, “I believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ God’s only Son….” etc. In the Anabaptist-Mennonite church, though, the creeds don’t play a major role in our worship. But hymns do, and the Trinity can be found in many beloved hymns that we sing, and which shape our faith and theology.[[1]](#footnote-1) Even the beloved Doxology or 606 (now *Voices Together* 70) which Jenna Zee chose for Singing Sunday recently includes the words, “Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,” repeated in a fancy, syncopated rhythm in the middle. We name God as Trinity in song maybe more than we realize.

So, in light of all this, what does the Trinity mean to us? If it’s confusing and not directly biblical, why hang onto this way of understanding God? Well, because it continues to name important truths about who God is. I think it even reflects some of our most deeply held values, like the centrality of love and relationship and community. For God to be a Trinity, one-in-three, means that our God is first and foremost a God of relationship. Relationships of love are built into who God is. This is remarkable in its contrast to ideas about God as lone individual at the top of a hierarchy, a tyrant who single-handedly controls the universe. Instead, we have in the Trinity a God of mutual love and shared power – we might even say, a Divine Community. So what kind of community is this? Well, our two biblical texts for today give us some clues.

The first Scripture passage for today is the story of Abraham and Sarah receiving a trio of visitors (Genesis 18). Now this is, on one hand, a classic example of Middle Eastern hospitality. These visitors are unknown to Abraham and Sarah, but they pull out all the stops to offer them an elaborate meal of bread, beef, milk, and cheese. Abraham goes out of his way to offer himself as their servant, ready to meet the needs of these strangers. It reminded me of a poem by Naomi Shihab Nye, which begins,

The Arabs used to say,

When a stranger appears at your door,

feed him for three days

before asking who he is,

where he’s come from,

where he’s headed.

That way, he’ll have strength

enough to answer.

Or, by then you’ll be

such good friends

you don’t care.[[2]](#footnote-2)

If we look closer at some of the details, however, there seems to be something else going on here outside Abraham and Sarah’s tent. The language for the visitors slips between the singular and the plural. We are told that Abraham “looked up and saw three men standing near him” (v. 2). Yet when he addresses them, he says, “my lord,” as if there’s only one of them (v. 3). Of course, the biggest clue is at the beginning of the passage: “The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre” (v.1). This is no ordinary visit, but a visit from God. And as a divine visit, it is mysterious. Like the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel – or is it God? (Gen. 32) – we have an attempt at depicting an encounter with God’s mystery, which overflows our words and understanding. But because of the simultaneous one-ness and three-ness of these visitors, there is a Christian tradition of viewing this as a passage about God as Trinity.

What’s interesting about this story is that the Trinity is the guest, the stranger who shows up at the door of Abraham and Sarah’s tent. God is in need of a meal and a foot-bath on a hot day. And Abraham and Sarah do the right thing, and offer hospitality and welcome. The next story in this chapter is that of Sodom and Gomorrah, the sins of which are not to do with sexual orientation, but with failing to offer hospitality, and approaching the stranger with violence instead. So our God who is a God of relationships values hospitality, welcome, and grace. God is a God of the welcome table, of the connection between guest and host. Along these lines, Paul says in the book of Hebrews, “Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Hebrews 13:1-2). As our community is in the image of God the Divine Community, we too are called to hospitality in this way.

Our second passage for today is the story of Jesus’ baptism as recounted in Matthew 3. This is one of the passages in which, again, the three distinct persons of the Trinity appear without that exact word being used. Like in the Abraham and Sarah story, we also have the Divine appearing as the guest. Jesus comes to John to receive baptism, and John at first protests Jesus’ request – it seems backwards to him! “I need to be baptized by you,” he says, “and do you come to me?” (v. 14). But Jesus insists and John consents and baptizes him in the Jordan River. At that moment, the other two persons of the Trinity appear: “suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” (v. 16-17). At this important moment that starts off Jesus’ ministry, the whole Trinity shows up to lend their support: the Spirit descends as a dove, and God’s voice is heard expressing love and blessing for Jesus, the Son. It’s a moment reflecting the inner unity and harmony of the Trinity, as well as its diversity (as, in this case, a bird, a voice, and a human being).

It’s this interplay between unity and diversity that I find really interesting about the Trinity, especially as we think of it as a Divine Community. It’s a more profound version of the truth that God is Love. In the Trinity, God is an interconnection of three persons in mutual love. An ancient word for this is “perichoresis” – a name for the mutual indwelling of the three persons of the Trinity. In more modern terms, theologian Catherine Mowry LaCugna speaks of this relationship as a dance: a “partnership of movement, symmetrical but not redundant, … an eternal movement of reciprocal giving and receiving, giving again and receiving again.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Notice the mutuality and reciprocal nature of this Divine Community – these are not hierarchical relationships, but those of hospitality, of taking turns being guest and host. They are also not relationships that erase difference, but rather are celebrations of difference, like dancers dancing different parts in beautifully synchronized movements.

This image of God as a Holy Community continues to inspire me, and I hope it inspires us in our efforts to be the church together. If God is a community, that means that we are not only in the image of God as individuals, but also when we gather as a community. We need each other to image God. Specifically, our community images the Trinity when we practice mutual hospitality, a sharing of power, celebrations of difference. I can’t help but think of our congregational welcoming statement that graces our bulletins every week: “Nutana Park Mennonite Church welcomes into fellowship and membership all persons who confess faith in Jesus Christ, without regard for their race, ethnic background, gender, age, sexual orientation, income, education, ability, and other factors that give rise to discrimination and marginalization.” This is the kind of community we strive to be, in the image of God, the Divine Community.

So like Abraham and Sarah, let’s not hesitate to show welcome to friends and strangers whom we encounter. Like John, let’s bear witness to the loving diversity of our three-in-one God. And like the Divine Community, let’s join in the dance of mutual love in whose image we were made and in whom we live and move and have our being. AMEN

1. Sarah Kathleen Johnson, “Trinitarian Worship for a Radical Church?” in *The Conrad Grebel Review* 37, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 173, 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. From Naomi Shihab Nye, “Red Brocade,” <https://poets.org/poem/red-brocade> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cited in Malinda E. Berry, “A Theology of Wonder,” in *The Conrad Grebel Review* (Winter 2005): 22-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)