

**Sunday, June 16, 2019**  
**Trinity Sunday (Year C)**  
Romans 5.1-5; John 16.12-15  
*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

Today, Trinity Sunday, is the only Sunday in the entire year dedicated to a doctrine of the Church. This is because the Trinity is so central to our religion. Despite its centrality, it also happens to be one of the most difficult things to comprehend about Christianity. According to this doctrine, we believe in one God who is comprised of what theologians oh so confusingly refer to as three “persons”—a rather unfortunate and misleading label. These “persons” are the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The difficulty is that there is little explanation of the Trinity in the Bible. There are texts about each of the “persons” individually. And there are also references to the interrelationship between various “persons” of the Trinity,” such as we hear in our readings today from Romans and the Gospel according to John. But there is little in the Bible to really bring it all together.

Based on all the information in the Bible about these three “persons” and how they relate and interact, theologians have developed the doctrine of the Trinity to describe a great mystery of our faith. At its essence, the doctrine of the Trinity states that there is one God in three “persons.” The three “persons” are distinct, but are of one substance or essence. Despite being distinct, each “person” is wholly God. Three in one AND one in three. A concept that our human minds can’t quite fathom.

The Church and her theologians have wrestled for centuries over how to best explain the Trinity. Probably one of the best explanations is the Athanasian Creed, which is an ancient document proclaiming the nature of the Incarnation and of the Trinity. (See page 864 of the *Book of Common Prayer*). But even reading that will probably leave you no less confused.

And, of course, preachers have wrestled for centuries with using a variety of analogies in an effort to try to illustrate just how Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are at the same time three and one. You’ve probably heard a number of these over the years. The Trinity is like a shamrock, with three leaves, but which is in actuality one leaf. Or the Trinity is like water, which is manifest in three different forms: liquid, solid, and vapor. Or the Trinity is like a man who is at the same time husband, father, and employer. But none of these really do justice to the concept of the Trinity or adequately illustrate what the Trinity is really like. The reality is that God is ultimately beyond our full comprehension, and therefore, cannot be explained. Therefore, any explanation of the unknowable is incomplete and simplistic. In fact, any analogy attempted will eventually devolve into one of the ancient heresies fought by the early Church.

Dr. Elizabeth-Anne Stewart writes, “The Feast of the Holy Trinity could equally well be called The Feast of Holy Mystery—or the Feast of Theological Confusion! In spite of shamrocks, [numerous other analogies] . . . and other ‘homily props,’ most of us have made little progress in advancing our understanding of this foundation of our faith” (quoted in *Synthesis*, Trinity Sunday, 6/16/19). One cartoon video on the nature of the Trinity concludes that “The Trinity is a mystery which cannot be comprehended by human reason but is understood only through

faith” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KQLfgaUoQCw>). In other words, God cannot be understood but must be encountered and experienced through relationship with God. And the persons of the Trinity can only be experienced through relationship with the “persons” of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And what is the fundamental characteristic of, the basis for, relationship? Love, of course. And, as the author of the First Letter of John so succinctly notes, “God is love” (1 Jn 4.16b). If God is love, then it stands to reason that the Trinity can be understood, at least somewhat, in terms of love. So let’s unpack what this means relative to the three “persons” of the Trinity and to the Trinity as a whole. And we will rely on the Catechism in the *Book of Common Prayer* to provide the foundation for this examination.

Our Catechism tells us that God the Father—the “First Person” of the Trinity—is “creator of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.” And we are told that because it was created by the Father, “the universe is good, [and] that it is the work of a single loving God who creates, sustains, and directs it” (BCP, 846). Based on this, and on what we are able to infer from Scripture, we believe that the Father lovingly created all that is out of love for us. As an outward expression of his love for us.

How this love is played out in the lives of Christians is more directly conveyed through the “Second Person” of the Trinity, God the Son—Jesus. We know Jesus to be the incarnate Word of God, as John refers to him in the Prologue to his Gospel. As such, Jesus brings a distinctive revelation of God to the faith community. This is summed up in our Catechism, which tells us that “Jesus is the only perfect image of the Father, and shows us the nature of God” and that nature is that “God is love” (BCP 849). In other words, through Jesus, God came in the flesh to demonstrate his love for us in a more tangible, face-to-face, flesh-to-flesh way. The purpose of this is further expressed in the Catechism, which tells us, “The divine Son became human, so that in him human beings might be adopted as children of God, and be made heirs of God’s kingdom” (BCP, 850).

Of course, we know how this is accomplished. Through Jesus’ own death and Resurrection, whereby he defeated the bonds of sin and death, providing for the forgiveness of our sins, and obtaining for us eternal life. All the things we celebrate at Easter. That God, through Christ, loved us so much that he was willing to die for our sake, so that ultimately we have the opportunity to be in eternal relationship with God the Father and God the Son.

But we don’t have to wait for our own deaths to enter into the eternal relationship that the Father desires and provides for us through the Son. As we hear in today’s Gospel reading, Jesus tells his disciples that after his departure he will send the Holy Spirit to be with them. That this Spirit “will guide you into all the truth” (Jn 16.13) and that the Spirit will provide witness to the glory of the Father and of Christ himself.

The Holy Spirit—the “Third Person” of the Trinity—is meant to be the link between the ministry of Jesus and the future life of the Church after Jesus’ death, to provide for the continuation of Jesus’ ministry through the Church. The Spirit will continue to make visible the presence of God in Jesus. It is through the Holy Spirit that the love of God made known in the Incarnation of the

Son continues into the future, into the life of the Church. This Spirit will continue to express God's love for us by supporting us, inspiring us, and guiding us in the ongoing ministry of Jesus. Of God's ongoing presence in the world. In this, the Holy Spirit is the ongoing love of God given in an intimate and personal way to be with us at all times. As our Catechism summarizes: "We recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit when we confess Jesus Christ as Lord and are brought into love and harmony with God, with ourselves, with our neighbors, and with all creation." (BCP, 852)

Wrapped up in these manifestations of love—of these manifestations of the "persons" of the Trinity through acts of love—is the mutual and self-giving love that is inherent within and among the persons of the Trinity. It is this mutual, self-giving love that is manifest in the Father's love for us through the gift of creation, in the Son's love for us in coming to be with us and being willing to die for our sake, and in the Holy Spirit's love for us in providing the ongoing presence of the Father and the Son in our lives as individuals and as a community. All this love reflecting the love that is foundational to the Trinity and that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have for one another. The love that makes the revelation of the persons of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit possible.

We are the recipients of this outpouring of divine love in the unique ways only made possible by each of the three persons of the Trinity. Only made possible by the totality of the love that they have for us and one another. In response we are called to carry that love in our own lives and ministries. As Paul says in his letter to the Romans, "we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God" (Rom 5.2b). In this context, "glory" or to glorify, is to make visible the presence of God. Our source quote from the First Letter of John addresses this, as well. John does not just say "God is love." What he actually says is "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them" (1 John 4.16b).

Genesis, the story of the Father's creation of all that is, tell us that we are made in the image and likeness of God. If God is love as John asserts, as we see demonstrated throughout Scripture; as we see exemplified in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus; as we see manifest through the Holy Spirit working in our own lives, then we ourselves are made to be love. As our Catechism tells us: "all people are worthy of respect and honor, because all are created in the image of God, and all can respond to the love of God" (BCP, 846). How we do this is reflected in the Great Commandments: to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. How we do this is reflected in the New Commandment that Jesus gave his disciples before his death: to love one another as he loves us. In this way, we not only receive the outpouring of God's love as manifest in unique ways through the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We also are given the opportunity—even the mandate—to participate in that outpouring of love.

In this life, we will never fully understand the mystery of the Trinity. But thanks to the Trinity and the outpouring of love that characterizes each of the "persons" of the Trinity, the love that is of and IS God, we can and do participate in this sacred mystery as it operates in us in diverse ways as we celebrate the unity and mutual love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit manifest in our own lives and ministries.