

Praying in Trinity

Today is Trinity Sunday—which is the only day in the church year that is devoted to the celebration of a *theological doctrine*. Every other day in the church year is devoted to an event in the life of Jesus—like Christmas or Easter—or a moment in the history of the church—like Pentecost—or a symbol of faith—like Good Shepherd Sunday or Christ the King Sunday—or there are days in the church year devoted to the memories of saints, or special prayer concerns like peace or forgiveness or caring for creation. But today is the only day in the entire church calendar that is devoted to the celebration of a doctrine, a teaching, a theological idea—and that makes today sort of a different and special day.

And for us in this congregation in particular, Trinity Sunday is our patronal feast, our church's name-day. The doctrine of the Trinity is not only a central tenet of Christian believing, but is for us the way we choose to identify ourselves as Christians. We are Trinitarians, not just in our general faith-statements, but in our very specific and particular and personal relationships with each other here in this Christian community. So you might expect that the doctrine of the Trinity would be very important to us, something we would give a fair amount of attention and energy to understanding.

But in point of fact, I think the doctrine of the Trinity is about the most often repeated and yet least reflected-upon notion in the Christian mindset. We refer to it all the time in the Creeds—both Apostles' and Nicene—but for a lot of people, every time we stop to think about the Trinity, it starts to make our heads hurt. God is one, and yet God is three; God is three, yet God is one; how does that work? Ancient theologians went to great lengths to describe the metaphysical relations between Persons and Substance and Being and Hypostases—and most of us today don't understand what those philosophical mean, let alone the religious significance they were trying to express by them. And what does all this abstruse speculation about the nature of God have to do with *us*, with our salvation, with our healing, with our justice and peace and love, with our *real lives*, anyway?

Well, maybe, in order to get the meaning of the Trinity we have to go back beyond the developed *doctrine* and take a look at the core Christian *experience* from which the doctrine arose. Because the doctrine of the Trinity—like all Christian theology, really—did not come about because theologians sat around one day and said “Let's come up with the weirdest idea about God we can think of!”, but the doctrine of the Trinity came about because thoughtful people wanted to try to understand what it was they were feeling in their faith and prayer and belief. And we get a very clear look at the basic Christian threefold experience of God in our Epistle reading this morning, where Paul writes: “When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is the Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.”

Paul in this sentence names all three Persons of the Trinity. But more important than just the names, Paul indicates a dynamic relationship between the Three, and Paul talks about the dynamic way we faithful are drawn into that relationship in prayer.

Look at what Paul says about praying: “When we pray, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is the Spirit bearing witness with our spirit.” Paul is saying here that when we pray, it is not just us reaching out to God, but it is God reaching out to *us*, it is God's very self connecting with our selves, it is God putting God's own compassion and love and wisdom and creativity and transformative power at our disposal, so that we can draw on God's resources as we cry out to God and tune ourselves to God and pray in communion with God and work in the world in the power of God. Prayer is not just a human act of trying to get God's attention; prayer is a divine act of empowering us to attend to God. “The Spirit bears witness with our spirit,” Paul says, and that's what makes us able to say “Abba! Father!” to God.

And saying “Abba!” to God is also a pretty remarkable thing to do. “Abba” of course means “Father,” as Paul translates it right there in his own sentence. But “Abba” is the Aramaic *familiar* form of “Father”: it's roughly the equivalent of “Daddy” or “Papa.” It's a word that emphasizes not so much the stern, disciplinarian, remote

side of fatherhood, but the activity of fathering that is nurturing, generative, compassionate, playing with you till you giggle, checking under your bed and protecting you from monsters, teaching you how to go fishing and teaching you life-skills along the way, helping you grow up into being the best person you have it in you to be. When we call God “Abba,” we say that we believe those “Daddy-qualities” are how God is with us. And if that’s how God is with us, then that’s how God wants us to be, too. “We are children of God,” Paul says, “and if children, then heirs, heirs of God”—and that means we inherit from God God’s own characteristics. It means God wants us to be nurturing and compassionate and playful and protective and creative and helping-others-to-grow-up, just like God is. When we call God “Abba,” Daddy, we are saying that in infinite love God wants us to be like God, like children of the parent, like chips off the old block, so that we can love others with the very same love with which God loves us. “We are heirs,” Paul says, “heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.”

And that brings us to the third part of our Trinitarian prayer: when the Spirit within us empowers us to pray to the Abba above us, then we are also praying with Jesus beside us. We inherit from God the qualities of nurturing and compassion and playfulness and so on; and Jesus inherited those qualities from God as well; in fact, Jesus inherited those qualities from God in a way that shows forth *perfectly* how divine love can be lived in a human life. Jesus is the perfect visible image of the invisible God, so Jesus’ inheritance of Abba’s qualities shows us how we can be like Abba, too. The way Jesus is willing to meet people where they are, to accept people exactly as they are, and yet always to keep on gently pushing them to grow more, to understand more, to believe more, to trust more—the way we see Jesus treating Nicodemus in our Gospel reading today—that is a quality of divine love made concrete in human life. The way Jesus breaks down barriers between people, inviting all sorts and conditions of folks to come eat at his table, forgiving sinners, cleansing lepers, including the outcast—that is a quality of divine love made concrete in human life. The way Jesus is willing to suffer, the way Jesus, out of love and compassion, is willing to stand with people in the places that hurt the most, so that God’s healing and restoring grace can be revealed even in the place of pain—that is a quality of divine love made concrete in human life. Jesus shows us what it means to live Abba’s love in a fully human life, and the Spirit empowers us to go and do the same, along with Jesus. “We are heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ,” Paul says, “if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.”

So the teaching of the Trinity—especially as Paul presents it in this remarkable sentence—the teaching of the Trinity is not just some abstruse theological riddle meant to confuse us, but it is a word to us about our relationship with God, a word to us about how the Spirit empowers us to live like Jesus so that with Jesus we may inherit the qualities of God. And that’s Good News for us. It’s Good News that as we reach out in mission to our neighbors—as we create moments of beauty to lift up their souls and occasions of service to sustain their bodies—as we reach out to our neighbors, it isn’t just *us* doing it, but it’s the Spirit bearing witness with our spirits so that we can be Christlike to share the love of God. It’s Good News that as we pray, for the Church and the World and each other, it isn’t just *us* doing it, but it’s the Spirit bearing witness with our spirits, so that Abba feels our feelings of praise and thanksgiving and compassion and love, and out of those feelings Christ can make new possibilities for new growth and new grace in the world. It is Good News for us that when we break bread together in this Eucharist it is not just an empty ritual gesture, but it is the Spirit bearing witness with our spirits, teaching us to do what Jesus does, blessing the bread we break and the wine we pour in Jesus’ name, so that we, you and I, may be the body of Abba’s love for our world.

“When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is the Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.”

That is the Mystery of the Trinity for us, and that is what we celebrate today.

In the Name of God: Abba, Christ, and Spirit. Amen.