

Genesis 18:1-15

2 Corinthians 13:13

June 11, 2017

Trinity Sunday

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

THE KOINONIA OF THE TRINITY

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

On the first weekend of February for the past seven years, anywhere from 50-75 members of our church have traveled to The Trinity Center at Pine Knoll Shores for a weekend of spiritual nurture, fellowship, and renewal. The Trinity Center sits between the Atlantic Ocean and the Bogue Sound. We study God's Word, we eat, we sing, we eat, we pray, we eat, we visit with each other, we eat, we worship, we eat, we enjoy communion around the meal table and around the Lord's Table. Oh, and did I mention that we eat?

The sixty-two acres of land that now consists of The Trinity Center were donated to the Episcopal Diocese of East Carolina in 1949 by Alice Green Hoffman and the children of Eleanor Alexander Roosevelt, who was the daughter-in-law of President Theodore Roosevelt. When Mrs. Hoffman deeded the land to the diocese, she stipulated that the land "was to be used for a camp site and conference center for young people and adults, and for other religious purposes." The diocese was given five years to make some of that happen. A small place on the beach side and a motel-type building were erected to meet the terms of the deed. The Trinity Center as we now enjoy it was completed in 1997.

The Trinity Center vision statement says: "Trinity Center welcomes all people to the spiritual home of Episcopalians of East Carolina, where we share God's gifts of community and hospitality in a natural coastal environment." At the top of the Trinity Center History page on the center's website, you will find this poem by Brant Pelphrey, called "A Circle of Love."

*The Trinity, then is a
circle of love
in which all three persons
are constantly present
in and with the others,
and the work of the Trinity
is all one work
creating love in us.¹*

When we visit The Trinity Center each February, we are very much aware of the presence of the Trinity and the work of the Trinity creating love in us. The only trouble we've ever had at The Trinity Center was torrential rain the first year and some leftover snow and ice a couple of years ago.

Contrast that with what happened at another place of welcome, hospitality, and love. In 1942, Clarence and Florence Jordan and Martin and Mabel England founded Koinonia Farm in Americus, Georgia. They called it a “demonstration plot for the kingdom of God.” In the deep south of Georgia in the 1940’s and 1950’s, despite being a place of welcome for all of God’s children, the integrated Koinonia Farm wasn’t welcomed by its neighbors. In the ‘50’s the buildings and vehicles were peppered with bullets and bombs. Local merchants joined in a boycott of the farm – they wouldn’t buy from or sell to Koinonia Farm. The Ku Klux Klan tried to run them off. The folks on the farm met each and every act of violence and hatred the same way – “We responded with prayer, nonviolent resistance, and a renewed commitment to live the Gospel.” You might have heard of Koinonia Farm – it’s where Millard and Linda Fuller started Habitat for Humanity.

Koinonia Farm is still around. Their mission statement says, “We are Christians called to live together in intentional community sharing a life of prayer, work, study, service and fellowship. We seek to embody peacemaking, sustainability, and radical sharing. While honoring people of all backgrounds and faiths, we strive to demonstrate the way of Jesus as an alternative to materialism, militarism and racism.”² The farm gets its name from a Greek word, *koinonia*, that means communion, community, or fellowship. According to the farm’s website, “Like the first Christians, we worship, work, study, serve, live and eat together.” *Koinonia* is that word you hear in my benediction every Sunday morning – which was today’s New Testament lesson – “and the communion/fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.”

The *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit is really a wonderful description of the Holy Trinity overall – the communion, the community, or fellowship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Or, as Brant Pelphrey put it, “a circle of love...and the work of the Trinity is all one work creating love in us.”

On this Trinity Sunday, as I stand here and preach about the Holy Trinity, I am well aware of the irony of having included John Wesley’s comment in the margin note next to the Prayer of Confession: “Bring me a worm that can comprehend a man, and then I will show you a man that can comprehend the Triune God.” Just the other day I saw a pregnancy announcement on Facebook. In the photo, mom, dad, and their little girl are standing next to a wall or the side of a building. Dad is holding their little girl, while mom stands to their right. A big plus sign is written on the wall between them. To the mom’s right is an equals sign, followed by the number 5. At first the math doesn’t seem to work: $2 + 1 = 4$, not 5. Ah, the light bulb went off – sure enough, they were expecting twins!

Critics of the idea of one God, three Persons, blessed Trinity charge that the math doesn’t work. $1 + 1 + 1 = 3$, not one. One answer is, that math is wrong. It’s not $1 + 1 + 1$, but $1 \times 1 \times 1$ which does equal one. But that “explanation” or illustration of the Trinity, just like any other example or metaphor, can never fully explain God the Three in One. Nor can we ever fully comprehend the Triune God. But that doesn’t mean Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever isn’t important in our lives.

Some of you may be familiar with the music of Carrie Newcomer. Her story songs are full of references to the Bible, theology, and literature. She writes and sings songs that plumb the depths of life’s biggest questions through the stories and

experiences of regular folks like you and me. She sings a song called “Three Women Holding Hands” that makes me think of the Trinity every time I hear it. Try as I might, I couldn’t find any information about the story behind the song. I think it’s probably about exactly what she sings about – the strength of women. However, listen to some of the lyrics and think about the *koinonia* of the Trinity, about the work of the Trinity, the work of creating love in us.

*There’s a light in the kitchen, there’s a glass on the stand
Three women round the table and they’re holding hands
They’re care taking the birthings, bringing food when they can
They’re easin’ the leavin’ and they’re holding hands
The night can be dark, so dark and wild
And life burns like a diamond
It’s unbearably hard
But it’s sweeter than honey, right from the jar
Here’s to the women who bind the wounds tight
Here’s to the ones who sit talking half of the night
Here’s to the love and the life that they mend
And here’s to the strength in women holding hands³*

How do you explain the Trinity? I don’t know that you can. In fact, I don’t know that we want to explain the Trinity, at least not in a logical, airtight argument sense. After all, we’re talking about a relationship among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – a dynamic relationship of love and mutual concern and the creative work of love that reaches out to us and invites us into that relationship, through the grace of Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the *koinonia*/communion/fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Because it’s so hard to explain God (and, really, so unsatisfying to “explain” God), God’s people have used images throughout the years to get at the truth of God-the-three-in-one and the importance of the Trinity for our lives.

Look at the picture in the bulletin of the three figures sitting at the table. This is Andrei Rublev’s painting of the Old Testament story that Brenda read from Genesis 18, about Abraham’s three visitors under the oaks of Mamre. For centuries, people of faith have seen the Holy Trinity in these strange guests who show up unexpectedly to visit with Abraham. The great spiritual writer, Henri Nouwen, said this about the icon painted in 1411: “The more we look at this holy image with the eyes of faith, the more we come to realize that it is painted not as a lovely decoration for a convent church, nor as a helpful explanation of a difficult doctrine, but as a holy place to enter and stay within. As we place ourselves in front of the icon in prayer, we come to experience a gentle invitation to participate in the intimate conversation that is taking place among the three divine angels and to join them around the table. The movement from the Father toward the Son and the movement of both Son and Spirit toward the Father become a movement in which the one who prays is lifted up and held secure . . . We come to see with our inner eyes that all engagements in this world can bear fruit only when they take place within this divine circle...the house of perfect love.”

One blogger observes that “Many in Rublev’s culture were confused by the doctrine of the Trinity and others rejected it altogether. Rublev’s Trinity showed them a lovely understanding of God as Three-in-One that is beyond trying to ‘figure it out.’ Praying to the Lord before Rublev’s icon painting can help us to join Abraham in hosting the Lord in our hearts. As we do we discover that the Father, Son, and Spirit were already inviting us to join in their circle of love! ‘We love because He first loved us’ (1 John 4:19).”⁴

When I was in the 7th grade in Atlanta, I played church-league basketball for Second Ponce de Leon Baptist Church under Coach Bobby Ward. This was serious basketball. Coach Ward had us play in three different leagues. We went 36-4 that year and won two out of three championships. We were called the “Saints.” One of our biggest rivals was the Holy Spirit Catholic Church. Now that I think about, it’s kind of humorous to think about the Holy Spirit beating the Saints or vice versa. Fortunately we didn’t have to play the Father and the Son! Although Coach Ward taught us to be good sports even as we played hard and played to win, there wasn’t much koinonia between the Holy Spirit and the Saints in the gym.

But there is plenty of koinonia to be shared with the Holy Trinity. Out of their mutual love and concern, they invite us to be a part of that work of love and hospitality that they are creating among God’s people. The koinonia of the Trinity is not just an example to strive for, but a gracious invitation to join and enjoy and live into and out of that deep, abiding love. When we accept the invitation and live in that love and koinonia, we will truly be able to sing and mean it:

*All praise to the Father from whom all things come.
And all praise to Christ Jesus, His only Son.
And all praise to the Spirit who makes us one.
And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love,
Yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.*

Let us pray: Father, Son, Holy Spirit, within whose unity lies all perfect love, justice, peace and power, as we gather here today as your body, your church, fill our hearts with your Spirit and encircle us with your love. Empower us and inspire us, Holy Trinity. Amen.

NOTES

¹www.trinityctr.com

²www.koinoniafarm.org

³www.play.google.com

⁴All of the information about Rublev’s icon comes from Bill Gaultiere, “Enjoy the Hospitality of the Trinity (with Rublev’s Icon), August 6, 2012 at “Soul Shepherding” at www.soulshepherding.org.