

John 1:1-5, 14-18

Romans 5:1-11

June 12, 2022

TRINITY SUNDAY

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

PRAISE FATHER, SON, AND HOLY GHOST

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

Each morning at 10:15 last week during Kirkwood Creation Camp, Debbie and I would herd our 5th graders to the labyrinth area overlooking the lake. Pastor Ray Mendenhall and his daughter, Sheena, led us in our daily Bible studies of different psalms. This year's theme was "Make a Joyful Noise to the Lord!" Pastor Ray taught us many different ways to make a joyful noise to the Lord and to give thanks to the Lord for all of God's goodness in our lives.

On Wednesday, Pastor Ray taught us that the Celtic Christians of the British Isles from the 3rd - 12th centuries A.D. thanked God for everything, all the time, including first thing in the morning. I want to teach you the prayer that Pastor Ray taught us this week, along with the hand motions:

* (Lift your hand up to the heavens.) Bless to me, O God . . .

* Name whatever you want to give thanks to God for . . .

* (Hold out your hands and then cross them over your chest.) Which is a gift from your hand to me.

[Let's pray that prayer several times as we thank God for the many blessings God has given us.]

In some ways, what we just prayed could be called a "doxology." "Doxology" comes from two Greek words, *doxa* (glory, praise) and *logos* (word, speak). So, a "doxology" is a word of praise to God. We are familiar with singing the "Doxology" after we take up the offering in worship.

Thomas Ken was a 17th century Anglican priest who served as chaplain to Princess Mary of Orange and King Charles II. Rev. Ken was imprisoned in the Tower of London when he refused to sign the Declaration of Indulgence which was written to promote King Charles II's Catholic faith. Although he was acquitted of the charge, he later refused to swear his loyalty to King William III and resigned his office as chaplain.

Thomas Ken is the author of the "Doxology" we sing every Sunday morning as the usher brings the offering plates forward and places them on the communion table.

*Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;
praise him, all creatures here below;
praise him above, ye heavenly host;
praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.*

What we sing as a short, one stanza hymn was originally the final stanza of two much longer hymns, “Awake, My Soul and with the Sun” and “Glory to Thee, My God, this Night.” A third hymn made up the Morning, Evening, and Midnight Hymns. In 1675, Thomas Ken wrote these directions for his students in *A Manual of Prayers for the Use of the Scholars of Winchester College*: “Be sure to sing the Morning and Evening Hymn in your chamber devoutly, remembering that the Psalmist, upon happy experience, assures you that it is a good thing to tell of the loving kindness of the Lord early in the morning and of his truth in the night season.”¹

Here is a good summary of Thomas Ken’s “Doxology” — its theology and its scriptural foundation:

* *Praise God, from whom all blessings flow.* We praise God the Father who is the source of all blessings (Hebrews 1:3, “He sustains all things by his powerful word”; 2 Corinthians 1:3, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation . . .”)

* *Praise him, all creatures here below.* We praise God the Holy Spirit through whom all creatures praise God (Psalms 104 & 150, “Bless the Lord, O my soul! O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.”; “Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!”)

* *Praise him above, ye heavenly host.* We praise God the Son, who is the firstborn of heaven and superior to all the angels and the heavenly host (Hebrews 1:3-4, “When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.”)

* *Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.* We praise God in general for everything, and all praise is directed toward God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty, God in three persons, blessed Trinity!²

In some ways, the best thing we can do when it comes to expressing and understanding the Trinity is to sing God’s praises — Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Trinity Sunday is the only day in the church year on which we celebrate a Christian doctrine rather than an event, such as Jesus’ birth at Christmas or his death and resurrection at Easter. Ironically and interestingly, this “day of doctrine” is really all about relationships and reconciliation. If we spend our time and energy trying to “explain” the doctrine of the Trinity, we will surely miss and misunderstand the depth and mystery of God’s love for us in Jesus Christ, poured into our hearts through God’s Holy Spirit.

According to some estimates, Augustine of Hippo, one of the greatest Christian theologians from the 4th and 5th centuries A.D., spent up to thirty years writing his book called *On the Trinity*. There is a story about Augustine walking on the seashore one day, deep in thought about the Trinity. He came upon a little boy who was running back and forth from the water to a hole in the sand, with a seashell in his hand. Augustine watched the little boy carry water from the waves and dump it in the hole he had dug.

Augustine asked the little boy, “What are you doing?” The little boy told him, “I’m going to pour the entire ocean into this hole.” Augustine said, “That is impossible, my

dear child. The sea is so great and the shell and the hole are so little.” The little boy looked at the great thinker and theologian and said, “This is true. It would be easier and quicker to draw all of the water out of the sea and fit it into this hole than for you to fit the mystery of the Trinity and His Divinity into your little intellect; for the Mystery of the Trinity is greater and larger in comparison with your intelligence than is the vast ocean in comparison with this little hole.” Then the little boy vanished.

Who was the little boy? Tradition says God sent an angel to teach Augustine a lesson about intellectual pride. Others say the little boy was the Christ child himself who reminded Augustine of the limits of our human understanding when it comes to understanding the mysteries of the faith.³ At the end of thirty years’ work and fifteen volumes on the Trinity, Augustine’s final words in his work are, “O Lord the one God, God the Trinity, whatever I have said in these books that is of Yours, may they acknowledge who are Yours; if anything of my own, may it be pardoned by You and by those who are Yours. Amen.”⁴

In 1948, University of St. Andrews in Scotland professor Dr. Donald Baillie published his influential book *God Was in Christ*. Despite being an esteemed professor of divinity at St. Mary’s College at St. Andrews, his “explanation” of the Trinity is no dry intellectual exercise. He wrote about the encounters of the early Christians that led them to confess their faith in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. He said, “The doctrine of the Trinity sums up the gospel by telling us that the God of grace, who was revealed through the Incarnation and Pentecost as the One who paradoxically works in us what he demands of us, is the same from all eternity and for ever more; so . . . Christians can sing: ‘Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost: as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end.’”⁵

I always get a thrill and a feeling of inspiration — literally a chill up and down my spine — whenever I sing about the Trinity in worship. And the Trinity shows up in many of our songs and doxologies.

* We sing “Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty! God in three persons, blessed Trinity!” to begin worship.

* We sing “Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost!” in response to God’s mercy and love in our lives, which we know through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Or, as Paul writes in this morning’s epistle lesson, “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.”

* During Advent and at Christmas, we sing “Christ, to thee with God the Father, and, O Holy Ghost, to thee, hymn and chant and high thanksgiving and unwearied praises be. Honor, glory, and dominion, and eternal victory, evermore and evermore!”

* We sing “Praise God, from whom all blessings flow . . . Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost” as we give thanks for all of God’s blessings and his love that has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

* We join all creatures of our God and King in singing, “Alleluia! Alleluia! All creatures, bless the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Three in One! Sing praises! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!”

* We sing the words of Pastor Martin Rinkart's hymn, "Now Thank We All Our God," which he wrote for his family to pray around the dinner table, in the midst of the Thirty Years' War in Europe, in a refugee city full of disease and famine and suffering: "All thanks and praise to God, who reigns in highest heaven, to Father and to Son and Spirit now be given: the one eternal God, whom heaven and earth adore, the God who was, and is, and shall be evermore."

* Then there is the great retreat song: "Father, I adore you, lay my life before you, how I love you. Jesus, I adore you, lay my life before you, how I love you. Spirit, I adore you, lay my life before you, how I love you."

And, of course, we affirm our faith in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord and in the Holy Ghost and we baptize "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

In his well-known devotional book called *The Imitation of Christ*, the late-medieval theologian Thomas a Kempis wrote, "Of what use is it to discourse learnedly on the Trinity, if you lack humility and therefore displease the Trinity . . . I would far rather feel contrition than be able to define it. If you knew the whole Bible by heart, and all of the teachings of the philosophers, how would this help you without the grace and love of God?"⁶

Which is why I offer the Apostles Paul's beautiful benediction every Sunday morning as we leave worship: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you. Amen."

Let us pray: In all of life, Lord God, may we worship you. May we entrust ourselves to your Spirit and offer ourselves for God's mission in the world. God, grant us strength. Christ Jesus, bless us with peace. Holy Spirit, give us assurance that we are God's children, that we may go in peace to love and serve the Lord. Amen.

NOTES

¹Victoria Schwarz and Wilson Pruitt, "History of Hymns: 'Praise God, from Whom All Blessings Flow,'" at www.umcdiscipleship.org.

²Ibid.

³The Mystery of the Trinity, "The Vision of St. Augustine," at www.olmlaycarmelites.org.

⁴"On the Trinity (Book XV)," at www.newadvent.org.

⁵Cited in William E. Phipps, "The Trinity — The Triune God — the doctrine of the Trinity is not irrational," at www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/trinity/

⁶Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. Leo Sherley Poole (Harmondsworth, 1953), p. 27.