

## THE DANCE OF LOVE

***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.***

The boys in Mrs. Davis' 7th grade class at Garden Hills Elementary School in Atlanta used to be dismayed when it rained. Rain meant we couldn't go outside and play kickball. Rain meant we had to stay inside and folk dance and square dance in the narrow, crowded hall. Actually, in 7th grade, I guess the guys had some mixed feelings about dancing with the girls. I just remember most of us wanting to be out on the playground playing kickball!

Although I never got to meet Nancy's father, she tells me he loved to dance, especially to beach music. Her mom and dad used to triple date with two other couples and go out dancing on a regular basis. And her parents were both raised Baptist! They did become Presbyterians, though, after they met in college and got married.

A prima ballerina may put on a virtuoso solo performance . . .

A budding ballet dancer may dance solo in front of the mirror . . .

But most of the time, dancing involves more than one person. Why else would we say, "It takes two to tango" or talk about dance companies or dance troupes?

There's something about dancing that is intimate and moving. Think about the traditional father-of-the-bride/bride dance and the mother-of-the-groom/groom dance at the reception. Think about gliding across the dance floor with that special person for the first time. Think about working as one with your dance partner as you make the spins and dips. In her song, "Alice and Roy," Carrie Newcomer sings about a husband and wife, both 90 years old, who spy a young couple in a diner. They start reminiscing about their own relationship, and she sings, "Back during the war at a wild country-dance, He thought she'd ignore him but he took the chance, Fifteen songs later he still held her close And a million dances since then hasn't been enough."

This morning I'd like for us to think about "the dance of love." On the church calendar, today is marked as Trinity Sunday. That should be pretty obvious based on the hymns we're singing, the Opening Sentences, the margin notes, and the benediction. Today is the only Sunday in the church calendar that is devoted to a doctrine of the church. Christmas is about the doctrine of the incarnation and we hear stories about the shepherds and the wise men and the baby in the manger. Good Friday is about the doctrine of the atonement and we hear stories about Jesus' death on the cross on Calvary. Easter is about the doctrine of the resurrection and we hear stories about an empty tomb and the risen Lord appearing to his disciples. Pentecost is about the doctrines of the church and the Holy Spirit and we hear stories about the Spirit coming upon the disciples "like the rush of a violent wind" with "divided tongues, as of fire"

resting on the disciples. But you won't find any stories about the Trinity anywhere in the Bible. You won't find any particular verse that says something like, "The Trinity means . . ."

My goal today, as it is on every Trinity Sunday, is NOT to preach a sermon that *explains* the doctrine of the Trinity. I'm not even sure that it's possible or desirable to **explain** the doctrine of the Trinity. The desert father and intellectual Evagrius of Pontus from the 4th century spent the last sixteen years of his life in the Egyptian desert with Coptic Christians. He said, "God cannot be grasped by the mind. If he could be grasped he would not be God."<sup>1</sup>

As I said, my goal today is NOT to explain the doctrine of the Trinity, I'm convinced that the idea of the Trinity did not come about because some people long ago sat around and tried to think up a difficult theological idea for us to puzzle over 2000 years later. I think the idea of "God in three persons, blessed Trinity" occurred to God's people — became fundamental for God's people — because that is how they experienced God's amazing grace and love in their lives and in their history.

Maybe the closest we come to any kind of explicit statement of the Trinity in the New Testament is the benediction I use at the end of every worship service: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you." Thousands of books have been written about each of those three phrases — the grace of Jesus Christ, the love of God, the communion of the Holy Spirit — and the theological works are important for our faith. But it is the relationship that is expressed in and through that benediction that is at the core of our own faith and relationship with God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One of the early church fathers, Tertullian of the late 1st and early 2nd centuries A.D., wrote, "Who can know the truth without the help of God? Who can know God without Christ? Who has ever discovered Christ without the Holy Spirit?"<sup>2</sup>

For centuries, believers have used many different symbols to understand, explain, and communicate the meaning of the Trinity, God the three-in-one. There is St. Patrick's shamrock. There are three interlocking circles that look like a Venn diagram. There is the equilateral triangle. There is the fleur-de-lis. There is the example of water, ice, and steam, all the same but each different — or the sun, the sunbeams, and the warmth of the sun, all the same but each one different.

Today's bulletin has a different — maybe new to you — symbol of the Trinity in the upper lefthand corner on the front. Look at one artist's depiction of three dancing figures, and listen to one unknown writer's description of the Father, Son, and Spirit: "Father, Son, and Spirit. . . [are engaged in a] dance which is their life together, a dance without beginning and without end, a dance which is joy beyond all telling . . . The music of this eternal dance echoes in the vast reaches between the stars, and pulses in worlds inside of atoms, and travels on every breeze across the earth, and surges with the blood through our veins. From time to time, we hear the music of this eternal dance. During the silences when everything makes sense; during the celebrations when we taste a bit of heaven . . . When we are thankful for what we've been given, proud of

what we've done, hopeful about what the future holds. It is on these great and good occasions that we hear the music of the eternal dance, the rhythm of the Trinity. The Trinity is unending, joyous dance, yet the miracle is that the circle breaks open, and the Son and Spirit, still holding hands with the Father, extend their other hands to us, inviting us into the circle, drawing us into the dance, that we may become their partners, participants in their life."<sup>3</sup>

In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul doesn't talk about "the dance of love," but when he writes about "Life in the Spirit," he describes a beautifully choreographed relationship among God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit. As the writer puts it, "the Son and the Spirit, still holding hands with the Father, extend their other hands to us, inviting us into the circle, drawing us into the dance, that we may become their partners, participants in their life." Paul says, "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God . . . you have received a spirit of adoption . . . it is that very 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." (Romans 8:14-17)

Imagine that! Not only are we children of God, but we are heirs. We have been written into the will. We are in line for a full inheritance of all that God has promised. We've been invited to join the dance of love!

I remember when Nancy and I got the news from the adoption agencies that we had been matched with our children. We danced around the living room with joy! I remember when we got the final adoption decrees from the Halifax County courts and read the phrase, "Adopted for life." Those are wonderful metaphors for God the Three-in-One. Imagine God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit dancing for joy when they are matched with us as their children! Imagine God the Three-in-One decreeing, "You are my children, adopted for life — not just never-ending life, but for life itself, for living, for love!"

Two contemporary Christian writers have used this early Christian idea of the divine dance of love to talk about our relationship with God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Timothy Keller, pastor of the Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, says that, in the Trinity, "Each of the divine persons centers upon the others. None demands that the others revolve around him. Each voluntarily circles the other two, pouring love, delight, and adoration into them. Each person of the Trinity loves, adores, defers to, and rejoices in the other. That creates a dynamic, pulsating dance of joy and love."<sup>4</sup>

Brian McLaren, a pastor, theologian, writer, and speaker, talks about how the early church leaders used the image of the "circle dance" to describe the Trinity. "The Trinity was an eternal dance of the Father, Son and Spirit sharing mutual love, honor, happiness, joy and respect . . . God's act of creation means that God is inviting more and more beings into the eternal dance of Joy. Sin means that people are stepping out of the dance.... stomping on feet instead of moving with grace, rhythm and reverence. Then in Jesus, God enters creation to restore the rhythm and beauty again."<sup>5</sup>

At the end of every LOGOS Wednesday, after the tables have been cleared and we have played our table game, we all hold hands in a big circle in the Fellowship Hall. We sing “Happy Birthday” and the Doxology or Gloria Patri. I don’t think we’ve ever danced! Nevertheless, the circle unites us as one body. Sometimes the circle is broken, but it’s only to let other folks join in. Two people, still holding hands with the others, extend their other hands to other people on the outside, inviting them into the circle, drawing them into the dance, that they may become their partners. We frequently remind one another that the only rule of LOGOS is “Everyone will treat everyone else as a child of God.”

“It is that very 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” — one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Our closing hymn today is at the request of the Wednesday morning Bible study group, who said, “We **are** going to sing ‘Lord of the Dance’ on Sunday, right?” When Bible study was over, I e-mailed Cheryl and texted Vera and Karla and changed the order and selection of today’s hymns. Hymn #157 is not particularly a Trinitarian hymn, but if we think about God the Son dancing with joy and love with God the Father and God the Spirit, how can we sit this one out?

*Dance, then, wherever you may be;  
I am the Lord of the Dance, said he,  
and I’ll lead you all, wherever you may be,  
and I’ll lead you all in the dance, said he.*

***Let us pray: Holy God, continue to build this church into what you want us to be. Christ our Savior, lead us to do your will. Holy Spirit, our Power, strengthen us for the work of the kingdom. O God, three in One, fill us with your presence, now and always. Amen.***

NOTES

<sup>1-5</sup>All of the citations in this sermon are from “The Dance of Love: Perichoresis,” at [www.musicanddancing.wordpress.com/perichoresis/](http://www.musicanddancing.wordpress.com/perichoresis/)