

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Dan Krebill, co-pastor

May 30, 2010
Trinity Sunday
John 16:12-15

Living in the Trinity

This morning, later in the service we're going to celebrate the sacrament of baptism, when we will baptize one of the newest infant members of our congregation. Baptism has a number of layers of meaning to it. For one, it is an opportunity for us as the people of God to give our thanks to God for the gift of yet another person who joins our family of faith and fellowship. We acknowledge that all life is a gift from God. And in baptism we publicly declare that truth that is in the mysteriously wonderful event of the birth of a child. How appropriate it is that we take time to formally thank our God for this gift of new life.

Another layer of meaning comes in the promises that are made in baptism—both the promises of those presenting their children for baptism as well as the promises made by all of the Christians witnessing the baptism. Those promises have to do with the pledge to do everything possible to teach and nurture the child in the fullness of the life and faith of the Christian church so that at some point when the child is raised, she is able to affirm for herself a strong and certain faith in Jesus Christ. On the parents' part, the promise is to fully live their own faith in visible and tangible ways so that their child will be immersed in Christian love and nurture every step of the way from infancy, through childhood and into adulthood. Those in the Christian family also promise to provide support, guidance and resources to the parents so that they will be able to persevere and prevail as they live out their own commitment to the child and thereby fulfill their promises.

These first two layers of meaning—the welcoming into the family of faith, and the commitment to faithful living—while mentioned here in the context of infant baptism, because that's who is being baptized today, also apply to adult baptism or to what is sometimes called “believer's baptism.” For when an adult or youth who is on the way to adulthood is baptized, the person is still being welcomed into the community with the acknowledgment that his or her life has its source in God. And in the case of the promises made, the one being baptized himself or herself makes the promise to live faithfully, but the congregation also makes the promise to nurture and support the newly baptized in the months and years ahead.

A third layer of meaning has to do with the act of baptism itself in which water is used. Water is used for a couple of reasons. First, water is used because of its cleansing properties. Throughout our lives water is used as a source of washing and cleaning. When water is used for washing, dirt and soil are removed leaving behind a clean and fresh washee. So in baptism washing and cleaning are symbols for the grace of God, given through Jesus Christ. God's grace frees us from the burden of sin and cleanses us for living as those forgiven by God. And because God's amazing grace is all-sufficient, God's grace is more abundant and all encompassing than all the sinfulness of a lifetime. We are not freed from sinful behavior and attitudes after baptism, but we are promised that the full extent of forgiveness of our sins will more than cover the extent of our sinfulness. That's why a particular person is baptized only one time—God's grace is all-sufficient. The second reason that water is used in baptism is because of its life-giving as well as life-taking properties. While water is absolutely essential to life, it can also be the cause of death if it overtakes us and overwhelms us, as in drowning. It is a classic example of too much of a good thing

when water is the cause of death, In baptism people symbolically die to their old lives as they go under the water, and they rise to new life in Christ as they come up and out from under the water. This is why baptism is understood as that moment of being born again through the power of God's Holy Spirit.

The last layer of meaning of baptism has to do with the words that are said when one is baptized. The words are simple and yet profound as the person is baptized "in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." This classic Trinitarian formula has been used across the ages of the Christian faith. Baptisms are not conducted within the confines of particular denominations or even traditions within Christianity. One is baptized into the one, holy catholic church, using the words of the Apostles' Creed. By the way, the word "catholic:" with a lower case "c" means universal. It is not to be confused with the more narrow and specific particular Roman Catholic church. When we say catholic we mean the entire Christian church across the globe of all stripes and persuasions. This again speaks to the conviction that one is baptized only once in a lifetime. As far as we're concerned it does not matter whether or not one's baptism was in a Presbyterian church, as long as one has been baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. By mentioning the three persons of the Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—we are affirming one of the central truths of the Christian faith: the belief that God is one and at the same time God is three. This Trinitarian affirmation is one that binds all Christians together, whether they be conservative fundamentalists on the right or progressive liberals on the left, as well as all the rest of us in between. Our belief in God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit binds us together.

Today is called Trinity Sunday. It is always the Sunday right after Pentecost Sunday. Pentecost is that day when the church was born when the Holy Spirit who had been promised by Jesus came to the disciples who were gathered in Jerusalem and infused them with power, conviction and courage that enabled them to carry on the ministry of Jesus in their generation and in all the generations between then and now. Pentecost marks the end of the approximately 6-month long cycle each year that begins with the anticipation of the birth of Jesus as promised by God, and ends after we follow Jesus' birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection. Trinity Sunday is when we mark the fullness of God in three persons and that we then continue to celebrate for the other 6 months of the year as we ponder and reflect on that fullness. We're called to live in the Trinity as we go about our living as children of God.

Sometimes we can get bogged down in a theological or philosophical quagmire when we convince ourselves that everything about our faith and theology is completely understandable if only we will take enough time and effort to come to that complete understanding. This is especially true of denominations like ours where there is a high value placed on the intellectual and academic approaches to understanding. Nowhere is this getting bogged down in a quagmire more evident than when we bring this intellectual approach to understanding the Trinity. Think about it for a moment. The basic assertion itself that God is one and at the same time God is three flies in the face of mathematical logic if none other.

The source of this God in three persons has its foundation in the Bible itself, where we find evidence and overt mention of all three persons. There are abundant examples of

God being not just understood as father but experienced as father. In fact Jesus himself refers to God as his father time and time again. And then the whole New Testament is given over to the testimony to the reality of Jesus. And of course in the 4 gospels he is referenced as God's son countless times. That God and Jesus are one and the same is affirmed over and over again. Again, last Sunday was our celebration of the coming of that promised Holy Spirit who comes into God's people as the power that inspires and enables God's work to continue. So on a very fundamental and basic level, belief in the Trinity has its foundation in the Bible. But we're still left with the question of how can one and three be the same?

Sean Gilbert, an Australian pastor, writes, "We often begin at the wrong place when it comes to the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. Given that its development had its roots in the adoration and thanksgiving of early Christian communities, it more rightly needs to be understood as a doxological (words of glory) confession of faith, rather than an all too complex and impossible statement of belief." (*Seasons of the Spirit Congregational Life* Pentecost 1, 2010, p. 21) He is right. While the countless books that have been written over the ages seeking to understand the Trinity have provided insight, for our purposes as a community of faith, we might best be served by living into the Trinity in the same way that we celebrate the beginning of the journey of faith in baptism—baptism in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

If we look at the three persons of the Trinity itself, there is an intimate relationship that is implied. The idea that the Trinity is made up of three persons is important. The Trinity is not merely three functions or three expressions or three aspects. The three are more integrally intertwined than that. They are in relationship with one another. The intimate relationship between a father and a son and the relationship of a parent and child speak to the intensity of the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We know that God is not limited by gender or by any other anthropocentric constraint. Our human language is what limits us to talking in gender-specific language. But our language is what we have to express this amazing mystery of our faith.

As we experience God as a loving Parent, Jesus as a loving child, and the Holy Spirit as a loving advocate and conduit for God's power, we can find ourselves leaning into and living in the Trinity itself. It then becomes less important that we intellectually understand, and much more important that we experientially affirm this reality of God. As this little one is baptized in our midst this morning, she will come to experience God's love for her through the love of her parents, family and faith community. The reality of Jesus as her savior will become apparent to her as the power of the Holy Spirit enables her to live a life of faith.

Let us pray.

We thank you, O God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for the expansive expression of your love for us that we experience in the Trinity. We ask for your parental guidance and protection, for the brotherly and sisterly love we feel as brothers and sisters of Jesus, and for the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, who works in and among us as if a wind of confidence and courage. May we renew our commitment to live in the Trinity as witness this baptism today as well as others in the future. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit! Amen.