

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
June 12, 2022 – Trinity Sunday
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Human beings are creatures who seek meaning in life. I think most people would agree with that statement. Without doubt there is a very wide range of answers to the question “What is the meaning of life?” but the question is nearly universal in human experience. For the authors of the writings that make up our Holy Scripture, God was at the heart of the answer to this question. For the authors of the New Testament writings, Jesus Christ was central. But these answers – God and Jesus Christ – aren't the end of the search for meaning. These answers lead to other questions. Who is God? Who is Jesus Christ? What is the relationship between God and Jesus Christ? How do God and Jesus Christ interact with human beings? These questions and many more are the work of theology, literally, the study of God.

Today is Trinity Sunday, the only Sunday in the church year set aside to commemorate a theological doctrine. Let me first state the doctrine in classical theological terms: God exists in three Persons and one substance, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For the first few centuries of Christianity theologians and other members of the church argued – sometimes violently – about what precisely this meant. Church councils were held. Heresies were proposed and rejected. The resulting statement of accepted Trinitarian theology is the 4th century document we know as the Nicene Creed. In the service of Holy Eucharist we use this statement to express our faith. As you know, in the Nicene Creed we profess our belief in one God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Creed fleshes out the persons of the Trinity to some extent, providing us with words to articulate some essential truths about God. This is an ancient document, however, and it contains language and concepts that are difficult to comprehend.

Though the language of the Nicene Creed is somewhat outdated, the concept of the Trinity remains highly important in Christian faith. Contemporary theologians have worked to express the nature of the Trinity in terms which are more meaningful for us. Here is a summary of the modern mainstream Christian view of the Trinity.

The Trinity is a community of love, bound together so closely that we worship one God while acknowledging that God is love and has the perfect source of love, the perfect object of love, and the perfect expression of love, within God's own self. Before anything else came to be – before there was light, before stars, galaxies, planets, before plants and animals and human beings – there was a community of love. The basis of the whole universe is not a solitary Creator but a loving, reciprocal, responsive relationship. Love in community is not something that comes along later in the story of Creation, after there are human beings and animals to love. It is something there from before all worlds, part of the very structure of reality, spun into every thread of the fabric of creation, woven throughout the pattern of the universe.

God is love: the Love arising from the Father, infinite, self-giving love, endlessly poured out.

God is Love: the Love of the Son for the Father, infinite, self-giving love, endlessly received.

God is Love: the bond of Love uniting the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit, infinite, self-giving love, endlessly returned.

God is Love: love poured out, love received, love returned. The relationship of love between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit has been described with the Greek term “perichoresis,” a dance of love. As creatures of God made in God’s image, our task is to align ourselves with God and to express in our lives a human version of the dance – pouring out, receiving, and returning love to God, ourselves, and our neighbors, God’s other creatures.

Faith in God whom we understand as a community of love is part of Christian life. But as we read in the New Testament Letter of James: “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? ... If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (James 2:14-17).

Our understanding of the Trinity as endless love poured out, received, and returned needs to find expression in our lives as individuals and as the church. We need to ask ourselves how our belief in the nature of God as love impacts the way we live. This is called “practical theology,” and it is the proper work of the church and of every Christian.

As we all know, living lives characterized by love is not always easy. Though we are made in God’s image, loving doesn’t always “come naturally” in our experience. Our love for God and our neighbor is “blocked” in various ways. Just as theologians have worked to articulate the nature of God, they have worked to describe these “blocks.” The results are varied. Think of the ancient list of “Seven Deadly Sins: pride, covetousness, lust, envy, gluttony, anger, and sloth.” Or think of a more modern understanding of sin as a general and pervasive preference for ourselves over others. Knowledge of human psychology can help us understand that when people are treated badly instead of lovingly, their ability to love is, in turn, damaged. On our own, a life of love would be beyond our reach.

But we are not on our own. As St. Paul writes in his letter to the church in Rome, “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Romans 5:5). The community of love whom we call God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit invites us to join the eternal dance of love. If I may put it this way, the Father doesn’t send out the invitation and expect us to get to the dance on our own. The invitation is delivered by the Spirit who urges us to say “yes, I’d love to come.” The Son then shows us the way.

Often poetry and music help us as we seek to understand God and express our understanding of God. You may know the hymn, “Lord of the Dance,” written in 1963 by Sydney Carter and set to a 19th century Shaker tune. Please search for this hymn to appreciate the words.

In the name of the Holy Trinity. Amen.