

Blessed Trinity
John 16:12-15
June 16, 2019

I remember my brother and I having a conversation when we were pretty young, about what we thought God looks like. I think I was the one to pose the question, because I had in mind what I thought was a very good answer, but I wanted to see what he thought first. He started describing an old man with a long beard, in a long white flowing gown, sort of your stereotypical idea of “the man upstairs.” I, being two years older, was much more sophisticated and knew that this idea was just a stereotype, and not what God really looked like. Now a disclaimer before I share my vision with you: this was likely the late 70’s or early 80’s. Just keep that in mind. Anyway, I told my brother confidently, God looks nothing like *that*. God is a much younger man, dark hair, dark eyes, no facial hair, dressed in a loose white peasant shirt. My vision only included the upper half of this man, but I’m positive he would have been wearing sandals. Disturbingly enough, I think he resembled Donny Osmond a little too closely.

That, I told my brother, is what God looks like. No, he told me, just as strongly, you’re thinking of Jesus, not God. That’s what Jesus looks like. Well, anyone who had paid attention in our Sunday School class knew that Jesus did *not* look like that. Jesus had long, light brown hair, and a short beard, and wore robes, not shirts. The funniest part of this whole episode is that my brother and I were equally certain about what God did and didn’t look like, and what Jesus did and didn’t look like, and there was no persuading the other to our point of view.

What settled the dispute? I think I claimed big sister privilege and declared strongly, well, God and Jesus are the same person, anyway. So there.

I am quite sure that neither of us had any concept of the Trinitarian nature of God, but we were beginning to get the idea that God is a bit beyond our collective understanding. Today is Trinity Sunday, and while most of us might say we believe in a God who is three-in-one and one-in-three, we actually have no more idea what that means than my brother and I did about what God looks like.

We talk about Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we envision triangle diagrams in our minds, we can sing “God in three persons, blessed Trinity,” yet we don’t really know what we’re talking about. And the first thing to say is that we never really will know what we’re talking about—not fully. We won’t understand the Trinity until the day comes when we see God face to face.

I don't often preach about a doctrine, but let's give it a whirl today. More than knowing about a doctrine, though, what we *think* about the Trinity-ness of God makes a difference in our faith. So let's start with "God in three persons." This is a classic definition of the Trinity, from early in the church's history. If you're like me, you imagine, oh, I don't know, three people holding hands in a circle. They are different people, but really could be the next three people walking down the street to work in this image. But this isn't how the theologians that created the phrase "God in three persons" understood the term "person." It's a Latin term, and refers to the masks that actors would wear in the theater. So it really might be more like "God in three roles," than God as three separate, independent people.

Because if we go too far in thinking of God as three, separate independent people, pretty soon we end up with three, separate, independent gods. One, God the Father doing certain tasks, like creating the world. One, God the Son, doing certain tasks, like redeeming us. And the other, God the Holy Spirit, doing certain tasks, like sustaining us in our journeys. Three gods, not one. It would be easy for us to think of these three gods as self-sufficient, as not needing any input from the other two. We could worship the god we felt most comfortable with on any particular day. And we would eventually lose God's one-ness, the foundation of our faith since Abraham.

On the other hand, we can have the opposite problem and focus on God's one-ness and lose the characteristics of each of the persons of the Trinity. We can smush Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all together and forget the uniqueness of each one, the roles of each one, and the relationships and communion between them.

So what's the alternative—we say we believe and trust in a God who is Trinity, but we can't really figure out what that means, and even when we try to understand, we tend to mess it up in one direction or the other. Well, we could just give up and go about our business. What difference does it really make if we know what the Trinity means? We'll still come to church on Sunday, so what's the big deal, anyway?

There is an alternative, and it historically comes from the Eastern branch of Christianity, what eventually became the Greek Orthodox and Eastern Orthodox churches. They use a Greek word that means "dancing around" to describe the Trinity, the persons of God dancing around within the very self of God. I know that doesn't make a whole lot of sense either.

I am extremely far from being an expert on dancing, but a long time ago, some other women pastors in San Antonio convinced me to join them in a

dancing performance at a fundraiser for Habitat for Humanity. As I remember, when it worked just right and we were all doing the same step at the same time, there was a feeling of unity with the other people, like we were somehow one dancing body, instead of being seven separate dancing bodies. I think that is what the Eastern Christians are getting at. I suppose, if you had a better dance partner than I am, you might get this same feeling dancing with even one other person.

It's that somehow even though there are three parts of God that are all fully God themselves, they smush into one another so that you can't completely separate them. But they are still three distinct persons. Even more than the dancing example, here is something that makes sense to me, and maybe it will make sense to you. High school physics class taught me about the model of an atom. The nucleus in the middle, and the electrons orbiting around it. And they told us that even in a science lab table, the electrons are moving around the nucleus of their respective atoms, and the atoms themselves are all moving around, even though we can't see it. And so I'm thinking that maybe the Trinity is something like that, not really with a nucleus, but with three electrons spinning around so fast that they blur into one another.

This idea of the Trinity is that God the Father wouldn't be God the Father without the Son and the Spirit; that God the Son wouldn't be God the Son without the Father and the Spirit; and that God the Spirit wouldn't be God the Spirit without the Father and the Son. Each person of the Trinity needs the others, and needs to be in relationship to the others. The nature of God is to be in relationship.

And here is where thinking about the Trinity begins to make a difference to our faith. If the inner nature of God, the very essence and purpose of God, is to be in relationship, to be in community; and we are made in the image of God, then our inner nature, our inner essence, is also to be in relationship, in community. God cannot be God without community, and we cannot be human without community.

Lots of people today think that they can be "spiritual" or "Christian" on their own, without needing a church community. And perhaps they can, for a while. But it is hard to sustain your own faith when times are hard, or when the routine sets in, or when things are going so well you forget about God altogether. And we are human, so things like that happen. It is less hard to sustain your faith when you have a supportive community of faith around you, upholding you when things are difficult in your life, challenging you when you get in a rut, calling you

back to faithfulness when you go astray. These are all gifts of being in community together.

I don't normally pay attention to hockey news, but apparently the final game of the Stanley Cup playoffs was this week. The series was tied, 3 and 3, between the Boston team which is called the Bruins, and the St. Louis Blues. The final game was in Boston. You can imagine that St. Louis hockey fans were on the edges of their seats as they watched the game. But they weren't watching at home. Thousands and thousands of St Louis folks—die-hard hockey fans and brand new hockey fans—filled not just the hockey arena but also the baseball stadium *in St. Louis*, again, not where the game was actually happening, so they could watch the hockey playoff game on the giant screens. Together. Watching the game in a community of like-minded people, like-minded about this one thing, however temporarily, made it better than watching the very same game in the comfort of their own living rooms.

Community is built into who we are, part of the very nature of the God in whose image we were created. Even for something as trivial as sports.

I think I'm telling you something you already know, because you are here this morning. You know that community is important; you know that you couldn't be faithful without the faithfulness of your brothers and sisters to uphold you sometimes; you know that you were made to be in relationship with other people. You know all that. I know all that. Let's go out there and make sure other people know it too. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.