

Love in Motion

One day when my son Nate was about three, he and I were in the parking lot of a Target store in California, where we were living at the time. I was intent on accomplishing some errand or another, but Nate was a curious child, full of questions, which meant that a short walk from the car to a store could be a long and interesting journey. On this particular day he stopped to pick up a little white rock used in landscaping the “islands” in the parking lot, and proceeded to ask me where it came from—where rocks in general came from. So I knelt down and tried my best to give a basic geology lesson, but it will not surprise you to know that I quickly ran aground. When his questions persisted, I finally resorted to “Well, I guess that’s just the way that God made it.”

Nate stopped, looked at me quizzically for a moment and then said, “But why would she *do* that?”

It was the pronoun in his question that struck me. We talked about God a lot in our family, but Nate’s Dad and I had been pretty careful not to use gendered pronouns for God. We just referred to God as “God”. Nate’s working assumption, though, seemed to be that if God was a powerful, loving force in the world, then God had the qualities of a person. What other way could there be to talk about God than in the language of personhood? “*Why would she do that?*”

You may or may not like Nate’s choice of pronoun, but one thing I think he had exactly right. The God we worship is not distant and abstract; the God made known to us in Jesus Christ is personal. God will be *who* and *how* God needs to be in order to be *for us* and *with us* and *in us*.

Nate’s question also reminds me how quickly we confront the limitations of language when we try to talk about what matters most.

Today is Trinity Sunday, which means we're going to confront the limits of language pretty quickly. Let me say from the outset that I hope you will relax because I know that I can no more *explain* the doctrine of the Trinity than I can tell you where rocks come from—

But you and I have a need to speak both *to God* and *about our experience and understanding of God*, and so we must stammer as well as we can through the metaphors we find in scripture and the language that rises in our throats.

The theologian Shirley Guthrie, who has helped many of us to think about the Trinity, cautions us that “the Trinity is a mystery to be confessed, not a mathematical problem to be solved.” [*Christine Doctrine*]

But Trinitarian affirmations permeate our faith:

- We sing Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty...God in three persons, blessed Trinity
- We affirm that we believe in God, the father Almighty...and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord...and in the Spirit
- We stand at the font and baptize in the name of the Father, and the Son, and Holy Spirit
- and then there is today's passage from II Corinthians, which includes the benediction that has given Sabbath rhythm to many of our lives: *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*

The church has been shaped by this Trinitarian mystery—the church has found this language *essential*, and so you and I need to ponder these affirmations if we aim to embody and to reflect God's image in the world. We may not be able to *explain* the

Trinity, but we are still left with the holy privilege and responsibility of *exploring* life with the God that the church through the ages has known as Three in One.

Let's begin with the *One*. To say that *God is One* was Israel's primary statement of faith. The words of Deuteronomy 6:4, known as the *Shema*, were so precious to the people of Israel that they were intended to be the first words taught to a child and the last words spoken before death. These are the words that began and ended each faithful Jew's day and each faithful Jew's life: *Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*

In cultures that proclaimed allegiance to many gods, Israel chose a narrow path.

So when Jesus claimed and demonstrated the power and authority of God at work in his own life, it is no wonder that his neighbors cried blasphemy.

- He healed the sick and raised the dead.
- He claimed the authority to re-frame notions of holiness and the practice of the Sabbath, which the people believed God had sanctioned in their present forms.
- And Jesus dared to forgive sins—something only God could do.

In the person and work of Jesus, his followers saw God's will and reign embodied on earth in the here and now.

But it wasn't simply a challenge for the early church to speak of *Jesus'* relationship to the God of Israel. Jesus also described the Comforter, the Advocate whom God would send—which some passages refer to as the Spirit of God, and others as the Spirit of Christ. As time went on there was need to find language that spoke both of the integrity—the oneness—and the diversity—the Threeness—of Creator, Christ and Comforter.

With time, one of the church's most helpful realizations was that *the works of the Trinity are indivisible* or as Shirley Guthrie puts it: "all of God is involved in everything that God does... The work of creation is not only the work of the Father, it is also the work of the Son... The work of reconciliation and redemption is not only the work of the son but the work of the Father and the Spirit too... The Spirit's work of sanctification... is also attributed to the Father and to the Son... What one [person of the Trinity] wills and does the other two will and do also. We never have to do with one without the other two." Jesus said, "The Father and I are one;" "whoever has seen me has seen the Father."

The word *Trinity* does not appear in scripture. It became useful to us because it describes the God we come to know in scripture: God who is, in God's essence, relational. If you take one idea away home to ponder, this is what I hope it will be: God *is* love. God cannot help but be relational. Divine Life is shared life—it was shared life even before human beings made their entrance on the stage. And if God in God's essence is life in communion, in community, then there are dramatic implications for what it means for us to bear the image of God into the world.

It means that we, as members of God's body, the church, don't have the option of rejecting relationship. We are made for communion, for community. To live apart from God, from our neighbor, from the world God made, from the depths of our own interior life with God—to live isolated in any of those ways—is to be less than who God intends that we will be. To shine with the image of the triune God means we are called to live with and for each other, with and for the world. It means that we are called to vulnerability even as we are called to a confidence born of dwelling in God's love.

No language, no metaphor can describe the fullness of God—but language has the power to include or exclude, to bless and to curse, to comfort and to challenge—and it matters what we say and how we say it. Language connects us to the sisters and brothers in the faith who came before us, and it will be a bridge to those who will follow. This is something we need to keep talking about.

A few years ago our denomination commissioned a study of the doctrine of the Trinity in Presbyterian theology, worship, and life. One of its foundational claims was that the doctrine of the Trinity is not an abstract theory but a practical part of our life together. The more I ponder that statement, the more I find it to be true.

The benediction with which I often conclude services uses quite particular Trinitarian language. The God who blesses is “the Giver of life, the Bearer of Pain, the Maker of Love”. I’ve adapted the blessing slightly but it came in its original form from a British community in the 1980’s—a community of persons afflicted with and dying of AIDS. Those were the days before there was effective treatment for this horrifying disease. Some of you remember how persons with AIDS were feared and ostracized—in the early days no one knew how the disease spread. Families sometimes turned their backs on dying sons and daughters, landlords evicted, doctors refused treatment, churches condemned.

It goes without saying that no one who is dying has time for a dry theological debate or empty theological constructs, but these same persons described their encounter with God in Trinitarian language. They named the One who is the Giver of Life, the Bearer of Pain, the Maker of love. Persons who found themselves rejected by so many, discovered that they were welcomed into God’s life-giving commonwealth. They drew Trinitarian strength from the discovery:

- That God’s creative power continued to call them to life even as their bodies withered,
- that they did not bear their pain alone, because they worshiped a God who knows in God’ own being the pain of death and loss
- that a promise of invincible love and community embraced them on both sides of the threshold that lay before them. They were held by a love that is stronger than death.

Friends, the life we share together—the life we share with the world—is made possible by the life that spills from the God who *is love in constant relationship*.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with us, and pour from us, everywhere we go.