***IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND THE SON***

***AND THE HOLY SPIRIT***

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Texts: Romans 5:1-5 and John 16:12-15

When our daughter Emily was about seven years-old, she was staying with a friend of ours in Richmond who had a collection of antique dolls. Emily picked out one and Will asked Emily what she wanted to play with it. “Let’s play baptism,” Emily replied. “Do you want to be the minister or the mom?” “I’ll be the minister,” said Will. “Okay,” said Emily, “but do you know what to say?” “I think so,” said Will, “I baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost.” “We say Holy Spirit,” said Em, “maybe I’d better be the minister.”

Whether Ghost or Spirit (the *pneuma* in Greek or the *ruach* in Hebrew), every one of you who is baptized had that name spoken along with that of the Father and the Son as water splashed on your head. While there are many things we Christians do differently from one another, one constant across all churches is baptism in the name of the Trinity. We may have different understandings about the efficacy of baptism, the appropriate age for baptism, the prerequisites for baptism, or the manner of baptism – sprinkled, splashed, or dunked – but all Christians are baptized with the same essential words: *in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit*. In the closing words of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus tells the disciples to “*go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit*” – and so we do.

In our affirmation of faith each week we hearken back to that formula by which we were baptized. We affirm together our faith in the words of a creed – often the Apostles’ Creed, sometimes the Brief Statement of Faith or Nicene Creed – creeds that span sixteen hundred years from the earliest statement at Nicaea in 381 to our most recent affirmation in 1990. Each creed offers a declaration of our faith in the triune God in a triune form:

“I believe in God the Father Almighty…

and in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord…

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church…”

For more than sixteen centuries, Christians have been professing faith in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For almost two thousand years, we’ve been baptizing in that triune name. Yet, while you can search the pages of Scripture from Genesis through Revelation, you will find no Doctrine of the Trinity clearly spelled out there.

It would have been nice for God to say to us in language as clear as the Ten Commandments: by the way, I am Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in case you were wondering. But God didn’t do that. For whatever reason, God’s triune self-disclosure comes to us in bits and pieces, in baptismal formulae, complicated discourses, and indirect references, that preserve the mystery of God while helping us to connect with the God we know in three distinct persons. As Augustine notes, we are speaking “*of things that cannot be uttered*.” What then can be said?

Perhaps the first thing to be said is that there is only one God. The ancient words of the Jewish *shema* express that fundamental belief for us clearly: “*Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one*.” Not many gods, but one God alone has our trust, our love, and our faith. That God is the One who creates, redeems, and sustains us. The same God who

brought the universe into being,

made a covenant with Abraham,

led the Hebrew people from Egyptian bondage to the Promised Land,

spoke through the prophets,

came to us in Jesus Christ,

was crucified and risen for our salvation, and

gave birth to the church at Pentecost

is the God who continues to work in and through us today. When Moses asked God’s name, God replied from the burning bush: *I am who I am!* The Hebrew text says YHWH, the Jews say ADONAI, Muslims say ALLAH, and we often say LORD, but it is one God who is who God is. And it is that God who works in and through us today.

Having said that, we experience God in different ways at different times and read the testimony to that God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is there in the passages we read this morning. In his letter to the Romans we hear Paul say, “*We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ… God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us*.” (God-Christ-Spirit) In John’s gospel, Jesus says, “*When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth*.” And then, “*He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine.*” (Jesus- Spirit-Father) For both Paul and John, God is distinct from Jesus Christ, yet the two are interconnected in bringing peace. God and the Holy Spirit are distinct, yet the two are interconnected in pouring love into our hearts. Jesus and the Holy Spirit are distinct, yet each bears the truth. God – the source of peace and love, Christ – the substance of peace and love, the Spirit – the vehicle of peace and love – this is the enduring pattern of God at work in our world and the continuing disclosure of God at work in our midst.

“*The Father is the creating origin of creation, the Son is its shaping origin, and the Spirit is its life-giving origin*,”[[1]](#endnote-1) suggests Jurgen Moltmann. In creation, redemption, and continuing sustenance, all three continue to be at work in one God. As John Macquarrie observes:

*God is not simply the transcendent creator of heaven and earth but equally the Son who has identified with suffering humanity and has even died on the cross, and is equally the Holy Spirit who groans in travail in bringing to birth the new creation*.[[2]](#endnote-2)

One God, three equal persons, that is what we affirm. The non-Trinitarians accuse us of having three gods. But we affirm faith in only one God who is revealed to us and is present in Father, Son, and Spirit.

When I was preparing the title for this sermon I thought about where the commas should go (lest I run afoul of Susan Polly, the English teacher). What I concluded is that no commas are appropriate in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit – it is one name, one God. For you who are more mathematically inclined as I am, it is the difference between a point and a plane. A plane requires three points. God is a plane defined by three points and stretching out into infinity; we are but points. We can relate to any one point in the plane at any given time, but we can’t grasp the whole plane all at once. Perhaps another scholar is right when she says, “*The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the whole darned thing incomprehensible!*”[[3]](#endnote-3)

But if it is incomprehensible then who cares about the Trinity aside from theologians with too much time on their hands? When all is said and done, when the last metaphor is set forth and the mystery of God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer – remains still a mystery, what difference does it make to us? Perhaps this – it assures us that the God who created all things in the beginning and

the God who died and rose for our sins and

the God who will walk with us all our days into eternity

is one and the same. It is to say that the God of our ancestors is the God of our descendants and is our God today. It is to say that the God who creates us, also redeems us and sustains us with every breath that we take. It is to say that God is the same yesterday, today, and forever whether creating a distant galaxy or teaching disciples or nurturing faith in our midst. God is so great that while we can describe something of what God does and can grasp a little of who God is, God remains a mystery, albeit a mystery who loves us without end. As Cynthia Rigby, one of Rae’s professors at Austin Seminary suggests: “*Whatever we do know that is right about God pales in comparison to the reality of who God is…[[4]](#endnote-4) The Bible testifies it is what God does, as well as who God is, that is beyond our best understandings*.”[[5]](#endnote-5) Were that not the case, then God would not be God, God would be something less. Perhaps Frederick Buechner says it best, as he often does:

*Father, Son and Holy Spirit mean that the mystery beyond us, the mystery among us, and the mystery within us are all the same mystery. Thus the Trinity is a way of saying something about us and the way we experience God*.[[6]](#endnote-6)

A mystery beyond us and within us, a mystery beyond our understanding – that is our God! We might prefer to have a better understanding of who God is and what God does and how God does it all, but perhaps some divine things are simply beyond the grasp of our feeble human brains. What then are we left to say? Perhaps just what has been said by saints across the last two thousand years: I believe! In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen

1. Jurgen Moltmann, *God in Creation*, p.98 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. John Macquarrie, *Starting from Scratch,* quoted in The Living Pulpit, April-June 1999, p.30 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Dorothy Sayers, quoted by Herbert O’Driscoll in *Prayers for the Breaking of Bread*, quoted in The Living Pulpit, April-June 1999, p.32 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Cynthia Rigby, *Holding Faith*, Abingdon Press:2018, p. xxvi [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Cynthia Rigby, *Holding Faith*, Abingdon Press:2018, p.3 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, p.93 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)