

“What Do Christians Believe: About the Trinity?”

*Genesis 12:1-4a; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17, John 3:1-17
Part III of IX in the sermon series: “Christianity 101”*

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens
Senior Minister

March 8, 2020

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent II, March 8, 2020, dedicated to Bob Monahan on his 90th Birthday, to the memory of Rev. Dr. Les Stansbery a true champion of peace and justice and interfaith relationships, to the memory of my friend, Mike Bowersock on the 4th anniversary of his death this week, to our four new members, Jeremy, Gary, Jilda and Carolyn and always to the glory of God!

“What Do Christians Believe: About the Trinity?”

Genesis 12:1-4a; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17, John 3:1-17

Part III of IX in the sermon series: “Christianity 101”

We continue our “Christianity 101” series today. We started with Baptism and how we begin to be Christians. Last week, we took a very quick look at the Bible. Today, we look into the Trinity. Again, I thank Marcus Borg, for his little primer called, *“Speaking Christian: Why Christian words have lost their meaning and power and how they can be restored.”* Good stuff! Let’s dive in!

+++++

*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation.
Amen.*

+++++

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity affirms in shorthand, “one God in three persons.” Like the Nicene Creed, this doctrine is a product of the fourth century. And like the Nicene Creed, the doctrine of the Trinity is problematic for many 21st Century Christians. Ironically, it is the concept of “person” that creates the problem for people. The understanding that each part of the Trinity carries a distinct personality makes it appear that we have boiled down our faith to a committee of three – God the creator, God the son, and God the spirit (Marcus Borg, *Speaking Christian*, Harper Collins, NY, NY, 2011, p. 212).

It shouldn't be surprising to any of us that Jews and Muslims, our closest Abrahamic sisters and brothers, understand the Trinity to be an abandonment of monotheism and an affirmation of “tri-theism.” But, this understanding of the Trinity, whether by Christians, Jews or Muslims, is not the ancient meaning of the Trinity.

Although created in the 4th Century, the language of the Trinity goes back to the New Testament. In the 50s (not the 1950s the real “50s!”) the Apostle Paul offers a blessing at the end of his second letter to the Corinthians “*the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,*

the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (II Cor. 13:13). In Matthew’s Gospel, written about 40 years later, the Risen Christ commends all his followers to “*make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit*” (Mt. 28:19). As you see, our language for the Trinity is grounded into the New Testament (*Ibid*, p. 213).

However, when you make something into a doctrine, you create an official formulated teaching. Doctrine takes time to develop. Believe it or not, it was THREE brilliant and poetic theologians – Gregory of Nyssa, Basil of Caesarea, and Gregory Nazianus - whom we call “the Cappadocian Fathers” because they were located in this particular area around Asia Minor (now Turkey) who put this all together. It was they who codified The Trinity by putting three articles in the Nicene Creed. (*Ibid*).

What is interesting to me is that many world religions affirm the **twofoldness** of God, implicitly or explicitly. Judaism and Islam, both speak of God being transcendent and immanent, more than everything yet present in all the universe. Hinduism speaks of God in two ultimate realities – fully transcendent as *brahman* and fully immanent within each of us as *atman*. Most religions, including monotheistic religions, are typically *binitarian* (to use a word that is not really a word). (*Ibid*).

So, why then, did Christianity add a third to this twofold affirmation about God? The answer is obvious: We have Jesus. The reason we moved from a twofold monotheism to a threefold monotheism is the significance of Jesus to his

followers in the early years of the faith all the way up to the current day. You might say Jesus is a twofold monotheistic game-changer! He was at the beginning and continues to be the decisive revelation of God to us. What makes us unique among all the religions is our close following and adherence to the way, the truth, the light, the life, the epiphany of God in Jesus Christ. The Trinity, seen in this way, is the strong testimony and witness to the centrality of Jesus for us as Christians. He becomes, for us, both the transcendence of God and the immanence of God wrapped-up in one unique divine and human creation (*Ibid*).

It is important to note that in both Greek and Latin, the meaning of the word translated into *person* is different than our modern meaning. In the Latin and in the Greek equivalent, *prosopon* refers to the mask worn by actors in the theatre. Actors wore masks not for concealment, but to play different roles. The translation of *persona* best translates, “to speak through” or “to sound through.” In reality, the *persona* is that which the actor speaks through. Applied to the Trinity, the ancient meaning of *persona/prosopon* suggests to us that God is known to us and speaks to us through three primary roles or ways: as Creator and the God of Israel, in Jesus, and through the Holy Spirit (*Ibid*, pp. 213-214).

This makes much more sense to me. It involves three primary ways in which we experience and encounter God’s revelation and presence. These are three ways in which we know God. Some theologians express it this way. The Trinity is about *internal* relations *within* God (*Ibid*).

I really like this helpful definition. If the Trinity is really about internal relations **within God**, we then have a dynamic and relational model of reality in our monotheistic faith. What if we see the Trinity not as – Gold, Silver and Bronze medals – who is #1, #2, and #3 – but truly an inner-relational experience - with God, in God and through God. This would alleviate our struggles to a great extent.

And we have had great struggles over the Trinity. It was divisions over our understanding of the Trinity that caused the “Great Schism” within Christianity in the 11th Century. It happened around the competitive theological team sport known “My Trinity is Right and Your Trinity is Wrong.” The issue was whether the Holy Spirit “proceeds” from “the Father” or from “the Father and the Son.” The Western church affirmed the “Father and the Son.” The Eastern Church affirmed “the Father.” In 1054, Christianity split in two over the issue, producing what we know as Roman Catholicism in the West and Eastern Orthodoxy in the East. Each side ex-communicated the other from the Christian faith (*Ibid*, p. 214).

This was definitely a low point in efforts for Christian Unity. 1000 years later they are still split.

But there is something truly at stake here. Let’s take a look. If God’s spirit proceeds from “the Father and the Son” and not from “the Father” only, then God can be known **ONLY** in Christianity. But, if God’s Spirit proceeds from “the Father”

only, then it is possible for God to be known apart from Jesus and thus God can be known in other religions (*Ibid*).

Can you see this?

All of these reflections are more than a three-shell game. They are much more than moving a coin around under fast moving illusions of hand and eye. This is about how we see God and experience God and how we relate to other people and other religions.

When we see the Trinity as dynamic and relational, rather than a competitive team sport, we gain true oneness with our three. We also gain deeper relationships with our monotheistic brothers and sisters.

I believe there is absolute beauty in our three *personas* of the Trinity as God speaks to us through the three in one. While it is complex, we can rejoice in the beauty of God who is Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of us all. As I look around our sanctuary today, I see the high and beautiful Days of Creation Windows which Speak to God as Creator. I see the Parable windows below and the Life of Jesus portrayed in the beautiful Jeffrey Windows in the chancel speaking to God as we know God in Jesus. I see the Friendship Windows and the Gladden Windows and Alpha and Omega windows speaking to the movement of God's spirit in friendship, love, justice and unity. Then I feel the Holy Spirit, our "Go-Between-God," blowing through the pipes of our glorious organs and through the incredibly gifted sound of our choirs and you as a congregation singing to the glory of

God. I feel the Spirit moving in our new members who step up and make a commitment to walk with us in our faith community. I feel the Spirit moving in the generosity of this congregation stepping forward in faith in so many ways.

Through the years, I have expressed my belief that we relate to the Trinity the way three siblings or three friends might relate to each other. You might have one that you feel closer to and who holds primary influence in your life. You might be more of a “God” person of faith. You might be more of a “Jesus” person of faith. You might be more intimately connected as a “Spirit” person of faith. Furthermore, through the years you might change primary relationships – just as we do with our shifting relationships with siblings or friends. For that matter, you may shift your love and connectedness on any given day at any hour. It is okay.

In the end, what really matters is that we have these friendships and relationships which strengthen our lives and keep us connected to God and one another. That’s what matters. Let’s not lose sight of what matters.

Creator, Christ, and Spirit. I feel God as One and God known to us in three primary ways. I feel all of this together. Beyond the history and theology, past all the divisions and different interpretations, I feel like the Trinity is a true gift to us as Christians. We have the opportunity to experience God in three primary ways.

We are blessed by The Holy Trinity. Let's live into our blessings – now and always. In the name of God – Creator, Christ, and Spirit. Amen.