

“Hope”

Trinity Sunday

*Proverbs 8:1-4, 22, 31; Psalm 8, Romans 5:1-5;
John 16:12-15*

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens
Senior Minister

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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, May 22, 2016, Trinity Sunday, dedicated to the memory of Lucille Anne Kropp and 61 years of serving Christ at First Church, to Lynn Wallich and our dynamic Deacons who give themselves lovingly as they serve our church, to Jan Wade and the beautiful Bereavement Committee of First Church, to our seven new members and their children who join today and always to the glory of God!

“Hope”

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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.

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Today is Trinity Sunday. It is the day each year that preachers are called to reflect on the three persons of the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit, or more inclusively – Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. We do so at our own risk.

In fact, historically and theologically any conversations and reflections on the Holy Trinity are rife with perils. Wars have been fought over the Trinity. People have been burned at the stake attempting to interpret the Trinity. The truth is few have been adequately able to explain the Trinity. And when the bold and foolish of heart through our 2000-year history have stepped out and attempted to define the Trinity, most of them have been accused of some heresy and placed themselves in clear and present danger under the threat of eternal trouble. Charges of Modalism, Sabellianism, Arianism and Subordinationism have been leveled following Trinity Sermons. I am not even sure what they all mean, but I know a few progressive preachers in bygone ages lost their lives because of these charges – thus causing a clergy shortage of thoughtful Christians at different points in our long history.

Even the instigator of our Protestant Reformation recognized the trouble with the Trinity. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther warned, ***“To deny the Trinity is to risk our salvation; to try and explain the Trinity is to risk our sanity.”***

Let’s look a little closer...

When faced with particularly difficult theological knots, it is always preferable to quote Jesus and not Luther. Outside of Matthew 28 when Jesus gives “the Great Commission” to

his disciples to baptize all nations in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (which all Biblical scholars agree was added after Jesus was here on earth), Jesus remained silent on the issue of the Trinity. So we turn to the Apostle Paul – who offers nothing helpful on the Trinity unless you are performing some really amazing theological gymnastics. In other words, Paul remains mute on the issue of the Trinity. There is NO doctrine of the Trinity in the Bible.

The doctrine of the Trinity, as we know it, was first formulated in the third and fourth century by a couple of guys named Gregory and a woman called Macrina – who have all been sainted for their fine efforts. Even then it took a hundred years for them and others who followed to sort out all the variances. Like a 100-year game of “Whack-a-Mole,” as one issue arose about the Trinity, they would knock it down – only to have two more pop up. Although a doctrine was formulated, it created splits in the church and caused much pain for people who couldn’t stomach the formulaic words of the Nicæan Creed or the Athanasian Creed – beautiful as they sound.

I am sorry Dr. Luther, today I will risk my salvation (your words), but I will save my sanity, by declaring the Doctrine of the Trinity a weak attempt to comprehend the incomprehensible mystery of the nature of God. The power of God to create the universe and each one of us is beyond words.

The presence of Jesus Christ who showed in life, death and resurrection how to be the Light of the World is mysterious as well. And when it comes to the power of Ms. Holy Spirit, there are no creeds and no words that can contain her story of wondrous beauty and her touch of transforming grace.

The trinity is not God, nor is God the trinity. The trinity is merely a way to speak of the unspeakable. And yet down through the centuries we have used the doctrine of the trinity as an idol and demanded that we worship the trinity as if it **were God's very self**. Perhaps this Trinitarian Idol Worship is the heresy— not the other way around.

As Christians, we have too often worried about believing in the trinity rather than relating to the One God whom we are called to love and serve. In the end, it is the nature of our relationship with God that matters, not our words about the nature of God that matter. It is more important to experience God than to explain God.

As **Creation struggles to “stay alive” under assault from** humanity, we should all be concerned about our relationship to the creation which God gave over to our care. As too many people walk away from church and Jesus, we should all be concerned about our relationship Him and with humanity which He came to heal and save. As people declare themselves,

more and more, “Spiritual but not religious,” we should all be concerned more about our relationship with the Holy Spirit, in which we love one another, commune with one another and feel Her moving among us and between us rather than about a doctrine which leave us dead and dried up – like the bones in Ezekiel’s valley.

As the church, we might want to revisit these tired old doctrines and allow the Holy Spirit to breathe new breath into them. It is not enough to say that two Gregory’s and Macrina were smarter than we are and therefore were right 16 centuries ago. We can do better.

We were created by God, redeemed by God’s Son, and sustained by Ms. Holy Spirit for relationship. Actually we were created, redeemed and sustained for a relationship of Friendship. From the pulpit of First Church Dr. Washington Gladden wrote and spoke these very relational words 107 years ago. He was 73 years-old when he figured this out. He wrote:

I share with you a simple truth...religion is nothing but Friendship, friendship with God and with all people... As far as I can see...this is all there is to it. Religion is Friendship... To be in harmony with God’s purposes, to be open to his suggestions, to be in conscious fellowship with Him - this is religion on its Godward side. Then, turning to humanity, friendship sums it all up. To be

friends with everybody, to fill every human relation with the spirit of friendship, is there anything more than this, that the wisest and best of Men (and women) can hope to do? (W. Gladden, Recollections, Houghton and Mifflin Co., Boston/New York, 1909, p. 429).

We have to center our theology in relationships. We have ground our theology in friendship.

One of the passages of Paul's which we do triple flips to fit into Trinitarian formula is Romans 5:1-5. Paul offers us faith in Jesus Christ whom we have come to know through the glory of God. Through our sufferings and struggles we have gained endurance. Through our endurance we have gained character. Our character has produced hope. Hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into us through the power of the Holy Spirit.

We come to deep and abiding friendship and hope through God's love. To this end, St. Augustine said it simply and well. In the 4th Century he wrote his own doctrine of the Trinity. He said, **"God is Lover, Beloved, and Love Itself."** Isn't this enough? Can't we discover Hope which transforms us and transcends mystery through "Lover, Beloved and Love Itself?"

My ultimate concern this Trinity Sunday is that Christianity stands in danger of becoming archaic and purposeless unless we can deal with what really matters. Your calling and my calling needs to be about reclaiming words and creating new images, words and metaphors that change the way we look at ourselves and our world- and perhaps even more importantly the way our children and **our children's** children look at us and our world, too. I believe this is essential for our times. If we fail to do this, our faith stands in serious jeopardy of becoming irrelevant and dying. If they are not in church **beside us, they don't even know** we are caring about this essential truth today.

While the Global Methodist Church met last week in Portland, I was aware that they were asking all the wrong questions. Instead of asking how they might embrace all people with **“Open Hearts, Open Minds, and Open Doors”** (the UMC motto which really should have an asterisk at the end which says, **“Restrictions may apply”**), the global Methodist church was caught on the meaning of Rule 44. They sent to **committee the church's reflections on LGBTQ persons for the next four years** – talk about being in the closet! In the face of putting LGBTQ persons back in the closet (along with all the leaders whose heads are buried in the sand), the church and this world is faced with an eco-crisis, global poverty at

epidemic proportions and more homeless and nationless refugees of war than we have ever seen before. In the face of all this it seems to me that the real and true sin here is the sin of the church refusing to love one another – refusing to be friends and in relationship with God, Jesus and the Spirit. We are shrinking Christians because we cower and hide from the very **fullness of God's love**. We will shrink into oblivion if this continues.

This Trinity Sunday (or just “Sunday” if you like), I Hope and Pray that we embrace our relationship with God who is Friend to us. I hope and I pray we simplify and clarify our faith in the One God who is Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of us and that God becomes **more fully our “Lover, Beloved and Love Itself.”** The One God who is “Lover, Beloved and Love Itself” will truly bring us Hope. And when we receive, we will the blessing that Paul intended in Romans - and Hope will not disappoint us. Amen.

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