

## “Unity...Binity...Trinity”

Scripture: Scripture: John 16:7-15

William C. Pender

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The Scripture reading comes from the Fourth Gospel, the Gospel of John, in a section often called the “Farewell Discourses.” These are Jesus’ words of farewell to his disciples in the upper room as he faced his imminent death...the very next day. This section is about the Holy Spirit who, in this Gospel, takes the name, “Advocate.”

John 16:7-15: <sup>7</sup> Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. <sup>8</sup> And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: <sup>9</sup> about sin, because they do not believe in me; <sup>10</sup> about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; <sup>11</sup> about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned. <sup>12</sup> “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. <sup>13</sup> When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. <sup>14</sup> He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. <sup>15</sup> All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

Sermon titles do not always capture a sermon, often because the title is submitted before the sermon is completed. Today’s sermon title promises three things: Unity...Binity...Trinity. Yes, I made up the second word, but I hope you get the drift. Our word “unity” is the combination of two Latin-based words—“entity,” which mean “being” and the word for “one”—“un” (the Spanish “uno” and the French “un”). Unity is literally: “one being.” Trinity is, of course, the combination of “entity” with the number prefix for “three:” “Tri-entity.” So, on the logic that we have a unicycle (one wheel) and tricycles (three wheels) and bicycles (two wheels), I have a made up word in the sermon title: “Binity.” It would fail in the game of Scrabble—it is not in the dictionary. But this made-up word serves a purpose today.

Today is Trinity Sunday...a Sunday to focus on that distinctive expression of the Christian faith that we sang in the hymn, “God in three persons, blessed Trinity.” So unity, binity, and trinity...each with a faith claim on us but the most important is trinity.

Unity—in this case the very nature of God, the oneness of God, what we call “monotheism....few of us would confess to being a polytheist—that we believe in many gods. However, as a theologian named Paul Tillich put it years ago, what functions as “god” for us is all those entities—all those things—that grip our lives, our ultimate concerns. Tillich said God is for us whatever our “ultimate concern” is. When you wear a clerical collar at wedding reception, you tend to get into some interesting conversations. Last night at wedding reception I heard again that familiar expression: “I am spiritual but not religious.” I’ve heard this before...which I translate to mean, “I have some beliefs but they are not very much apart of my life. they are not a real concern in my life....certainly not an ultimate concern.” No, most of us have multiple ultimate concerns: making a paycheck, raising our children, struggling with the “blues,” living with our fears, getting free of parents, confronting the loss of what was so important in our lives, being consumed by our anger, dominated by our obsessions. You know those ultimate concerns of our lives that capture our imagination, our attention, our focus.

All our concerns that we have let become god-like in our lives become less ultimate in the presence of the true God. Unity: the oneness of God...Jesus told a parable about the kingdom of God, how it was like a pearl merchant who spends his life searching for the perfect jewel. And when he finds the perfect pearl, he sells everything else in order to obtain the pearl. When we experience God or the kingdom of God, everything else pales in comparison. Unity: God is oneness, our ultimate concern...to seek to experience the divine. Unity makes a strong faith claim on us...but it is not enough.

Unity, then “Binity.” Where is the divine to be experienced? The answer in the church, for those who bear the name Christian, it keeps coming back to Jesus. So our faith conversation is not just about the oneness of God. Here is a major divide between us and Judaism...us and Islam—the other two great religions of monotheism. We experience God through Christ.

It is not enough to say, “Jesus was a good man...a good teacher like so many other good teachers.” We experience God—the one God—in Jesus. “Show us the Father,” said the disciple Phillip to Jesus. Show us God, the Father. And remember Jesus’ response: “The one who has seen me has seen the Father.”

In some way it is like the way children often confuse God and Jesus. Have you ever notice how children interchange God and Jesus. So for example, if you ask at the children’s time, who was the baby born in Bethlehem? And a child shout out, “God!” Likewise, if we say, “Who created the world?” Answer: Jesus. It is like the pastor at the children’s time saying, “What is gray, furry, eats nuts, and lives in a tree?” Child answers: “Sounds like a squirrel but it is probably Jesus.” Our faith conversation is about Jesus. We cannot speak of the one God without speaking of Jesus: a “binity,” a “twoness.”

In our Presbyterian heritage, we have had a tradition of producing catechisms: questions and answers for our faith conversation, particularly in our households. The most familiar catechism for English-speaking Presbyterians is the Westminster Catechism. The Westminster Catechism is heavy on unity, or the oneness of God. The first question is what is chief end or purpose of humanity? In other words, what is our ultimate concern? The answer: to love God and to enjoy God forever.

There is another catechism in our tradition, the Heidelberg Catechism. It was originally in German, so it did not get the same play among English-speaking Presbyterians. Here is first question in the Heidelberg Catechism: What is your only comfort in life and death. The answer: My only comfort in life and in death is that I belong, body and soul, to my faithful savior Jesus Christ. The Heidelberg Catechism begins with Jesus.

Everything we do in our faith keeps coming back to Jesus—my only comfort in life and death is that I belong, body and soul, to my faithful savior Jesus Christ. The one God and the one Jesus add up to sort of “binity” and yet I don’t think many of you have ever heard that word before...you will not find it in the dictionary and you do not find it among Christians.

Unity? Yes...God is our ultimate concern Binity? Yes, we know God through Jesus. But the key word is “Trinity.” Our faith is not complete without a third aspect. Last Sunday we observed the

day of Pentecost, which is the birthday of the church of Jesus Christ. The mark of that day was the extraordinary experience of the Holy Spirit.

In the words of our reading today from the Fourth Gospel, the Holy Spirit is part of God's plan in Jesus. And the name given the Holy Spirit is a job description. Literally, the word is *parakletos*, which many simply translate into English as "Paraclete." But the word has several meanings: Advocate, Comforter, Helper. The key focus is that God is at our side in the Holy Spirit.

And here Jesus teaches his disciples a further understanding of why he had to die. You see, the quick answer is that Jesus died for our sins, the sacrifice on our behalf. That's right...but that is not all, not nearly all. Jesus says, I have to go away (a sort euphemism for dying). I have to go away so that you can grow and mature.

Let me give you an analogy: On three occasions I was at the stage of parenting where I had a child learning to drive. Many of you have gone through that process...either as the parent or the child...or you will go through it. I can do a lot of teaching, cautioning, even panic expressions of "Watch out" but you know when the greatest step takes place? When my child drives without any direct supervision from the parent—it is thrilling...it is terrifying.

Jesus goes away...dies...not just for our sins but to get out of the way so that we can claim the rights, the responsibilities, the possibilities, and the trust that is intended for those created in God's image. What an awesome opportunity...but, with that opportunity, also comes the possibility to ignore it in order to go our own way. But God does not leave us alone. As Jesus would say in the Farewell Discourse, "I will not leave you orphaned." I will not leave you without a guide. So, the *Paraclete*, or the Advocate, or the Helper, or the Comforter, or the Spirit of Truth moves among us.

One of my teachers, Shirley Guthrie, used to speak of the modesty of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit points toward God the Father—we are to relate to God as the Creator. The Holy Spirit points toward Jesus the Savior...we see God most fully in Jesus. The Holy Spirit points away from self-expression and toward God and Jesus...a modesty. And the Holy Spirit will not break down the doors to a closed heart, wall-up mind, a driven self-centeredness. The Spirit is modest. This Spirit of God is often like the air around us...sometimes we only really note the air when do not have it at all.

So, let me conclude with a parable. It is an Eastern tale of the student approaching a great teacher and asking how to experience God: "Teach me to experience for God." said the student. The teacher took the student down to a lake; the two walked into the water; the teacher took hold of the student almost as if to baptize the student. The student trusted the teacher and so was immersed under the water and held there. Held there...held there...and held there. The trust of the student begins to disappear and to be replaced by panic. The student began to struggle, mildly at first and then fiercely. And after extraordinary effort, the student broke out of the water into the air, gasping for breath. The teacher simply said: When you want God as much as you wanted air, you will experience God.

How will you experience God? Unity...Binity...and Trinity.