

**-Sermon: Participating in the Trinity of God**  
**Scripture: Genesis 1 and Matthew 28**  
**Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans**  
**Date: June 19, 2011**

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A couple of years ago I went down to Hartford Seminary in CT for a week-long course called “Building Abrahamic Partners”. I was one of about 8 Christians who gathered with 8 Muslims from Turkey, Iran and Iraq and 8 Jews. We had sessions from Christian, Muslim and Jewish scholars and then had break out groups after each session to discuss with one another what had just been presented. We also went to a local church, synagogue and Mosque there in the Hartford area. It was an engaging and fascinating week of education, dialogue and simply hanging out with one another.

But I remember one of the more engaging conversations was about the Trinitarian beliefs of the Christians in the group. The Jews and Muslims, despite the scholarly account of the Trinity, held tightly to the fact that this notion of the Trinity was the single most problematic belief that the Christians had. From their perspective we worship not One God but three – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Muslims understood our *devotion* to Jesus, for they also have a similar sense of him as a holy figure in their faith, however, paramount in the Jewish and Muslim world-view was that God is ONE. So that Jesus was something more than human, someone akin to God was unacceptable. We explained to them that Christian theologians during the early centuries worked diligently to articulate how the three – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, were not in fact three different gods but rather three different expressions or persons or aspects of the same One God that they were worshipping, to which the Muslims especially shook their heads in disbelief. “God is one and anything that compromises that is very dangerous,” they would say.

The Jews in the group weren’t quite as scandalized. They were familiar with the teaching for one thing but they also realized that there was the truth of this multiple nature of one God embedded in their own sacred scriptures, the Torah, which is at least in part where the Christians got the whole notion from. You heard Frances read about the Spirit of God brooding over the deeps at the time of creation within the very first verses

of the Bible. So there already you have Yahweh and you have the Spirit of Yahweh. Not two gods but two realities or expressions of the One God.

As many of you know, one of our youth, Leah Berger, is going to be doing Kids4Peace next month, gathering with Christian, Jewish and Muslim kids for a week-long camp, and I am wondering if this topic will come up in their consideration of each others' traditions. The Muslim kids will most certainly have it very very clear, above all else, that God is One and so any suggestion that Jesus is also God and then, by the way there is also the Holy Spirit, is going to be where their understandings part way.

The word "trinity" is actually nowhere in our scriptures, believe it or not. It's a word that dates back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century and a man named Tertullian. He coined it as a reference to God and then there ensued decades if not centuries of debates and arguments and even violent struggles over, ironically enough, the nature of the God and Jesus' relation therein! There were many other efforts to articulate who Jesus was in relation to God and the Holy Spirit. There was Docetism, Ebionism, Sabellianism, Arianism, Apollinarianism, Monothelism, and a whole bunch of other "isms" that in the end, as far as the official doctrine of the church was concerned, lost out to Trinitarianism, the claim that "the one God exists in 3 persons and one substance". Although the word is not in the scriptures there is undoubtedly this clear sense of God and Jesus being one and then the Holy Spirit proceeding from them. In the Gospel of John you often hear Jesus saying "the Father and I are one. I am in the father and the father is in me." And then at the Ascension Jesus promises to send the Advocate, God's Spirit to the disciples. And in the baptismal pronouncement that Frances read at the end of Matthew it states – baptize all nations in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. And it is this sort of thing that required later theologians to figure out how God can be ONE and yet Father, Son and Spirit.

But I won't hassle you with tedious theological distinctions on this the first Sunday of summer. Let me just make one central point that in my mind speaks to the beauty and import of this teaching of God as Trinity. To say that there is something essentially Trinitarian about the reality of God is to say that God in God's very being is essentially relational... that when we speak of this higher power, we are not so much speaking of another bigger thing among things, as we are speaking about a relationship

going on that somehow all that IS is being swept along into. God exists as relation. God is not here or there, we might say, but God is between and among. This logically makes sense because God's creation itself is essentially relational from the interactions of the most minute particles with one another to the way solar systems and galaxies interrelate. As human beings, made in the image of God, we are necessarily relational as well. We cannot be fully ourselves, in fact we cannot BE actually at all, outside of relationship with one another and with the earth. From the minute we are conceived and born, we are only in existence because we are in relationship with another. It is the way things simply work and it is from such observation of how things work that we might even say, "yes, God, Godself, the creator of all this must essentially be a relationship as well."

And that's what the doctrine of the Trinity holds out for. Thus we could say that how we come to know God is not through logical thinking and figuring so much as through participating in the relationship that is between Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit. It's another way of saying God is love. You don't come to know love by thinking about it and figuring it out and making logical arguments for it. You come to know love by entering into it and loving. Thus we don't know God by figuring God out up here but by entering into the flow of God with our whole lives. And that's essentially what Jesus invited us into – into participating in the relations with God.

And so that's what it's all about. It's about our relationships, our relationship with one another and our relationship to the earth. It's why Jesus would say something as crazy as "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" because if you kill your enemy then there is no longer anyone there to be in relationship with, which again is how we participate in God.

Jesus didn't say much in the scriptures about our relationship with the earth because he was a product of the Hebrew people who had a healthy and balanced relationship for the most part with the earth at the time and it would have made no sense to the people he was relating to for him make pronouncements about how to live in right relationship with the earth cause it was all right there in the Hebrew scriptures. But now as we've gotten terribly out of balance in that relationship, things do need to be said about our relationship to the earth. And that is the responsibility of the church inspired by God's Spirit to interpret Jesus; his life, death and resurrection, in light of our

unbalanced way of living on the earth right now and the church should be on the front lines of challenging humanity back into right relationship with the natural world before all our relationships will be forever threatened and thus our very participation in God.

And so this is where we are left here at the beginning of the summer on Trinity Sunday with the challenge to remember that it's all about our relationships. Can we enter into this new season of summer intentionally caring for those we love and those we don't love and for the earth herself? Could the slower days of summer be an invitation to just be a little quieter, a little more attentive to our children, to our spouses, to our friends, to our earth, so that we can better know the very presence of God, Godself. Amen.