



The Dancing Deity

Rev. Chandler Stokes – Westminster Presbyterian Church

On John 15:12-15 for Trinity Sunday

Trinity Sunday

May 30, 2010

As human beings we have a deep and persistent inclination to imagine ourselves as separate, as in some way solitary, beings. Through emotional wounding, the travails of our living, or our experiences of abandonment, we incline toward the sense that we are separate and solitary: it's in our bones. And there are obvious ways of looking at the world, of conceiving our experience in the world that reinforce that sense of separateness.

I can see myself as one. I am one, an individual, a single being. I am over here, and you are over there. We could say that we are not linked physically, that there is no physical connection between us—thus, we are separate.

In some ways we are separate from creation. We move through creation. I am not the air; I move through the air, distinct from it.

And we can imagine God as separate from us. God is God; we are not. We can imagine that there is nothing essential or necessary that connects us to God either.

And this sense of separateness tends to dominate our awareness: not only our separateness from one another and from creation but from God. Our sense of solitariness is ready to hand.

And yet... and yet there is another way to view all this. There is a physical connection between you and me even now. As my vocal chords create vibrations, your ear drums receive those vibrations and move. There is a quite real connection, even down in our skulls—unseen and yet real.

And, as regards creation, one of my teachers, trying to make the experience of our persistent connectedness as immediate as possible, once said, “You think you’re not connected? You breathe.” Not only are we connected, but vitally connected, to creation.

And one of the ways that the church has insisted that we are not separate from God and insisted that we are quite thoroughly and vitally connected to God, is through the doctrine of the Trinity.

Today is Trinity Sunday. On other Sundays of the year we focus on a part of the story of salvation—the story that tells us of God’s connectedness to us—at Christmas or Easter or Pentecost. Today, rather than celebrating an event in the history of God, we celebrate a concept,

Because sermons are prepared with an emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts may occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.

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a doctrine—it is the only time of the year that we do so. It is a conceptual rather than narrative expression of God’s relationship to us.

Today is Trinity Sunday. And of course, we have a bit of a three point sermon: three things come together today. First, today is about the music—I am going to keep my words to a minimum; the sermon is the “liner notes” to the music. We are honored to have Nicholas Ayoub, the cantor from St. Nicholas Antiochian Orthodox Church, with us today to lead us in worship. He has been working with Helen and the choir to bring us music from the Orthodox tradition as the centerpiece of our worship.

Second, the Orthodox tradition has a particular view of the Trinity—a view which has become extremely important in contemporary Reformed theology. In the last twenty years, Orthodox insights into the Trinity have become very influential at Presbyterian seminaries. And it is beautiful.

And third, that theological understanding of the Trinity is communicated particularly eloquently in the orthodox tradition of chant, which is most of the music that Nick has brought us today.

So, a brief word about the doctrine of the Trinity: the Trinity is the view that God is three and God is one. It is a mystery, and it is an illuminating mystery. In 1054 the Eastern, the Orthodox tradition and the Western, the Roman traditions divided over a different understanding of the Trinity—and politics. I won’t go into the details of the historical questions, but the schism created a millennium of different inclinations as regards the Trinity. Historically, the Western tradition has emphasized the oneness of the three-in-one of God, and the Orthodox tradition has emphasized the three-ness in God’s three-in-one. That’s very rough, but it is why Reformed theologians have turned to Orthodox thinking.

The difficulty with oneness is that it is not only possible but even likely for oneness to be seen and imagined as solitary. If you can in fact be one, do you not imagine “one” as separate? Think of one apple. Think of one bird. Is it the picture of a solitary apple or bird? The picture in our heads is not necessarily of an apple by itself; it could be one apple in a bushel of apples, but it doesn’t have to be in a bunch and probably wasn’t, if the point of our imagining is one apple. Think of one person. The same holds; we can see them as part of a community, but to imagine them as one, we don’t need to. I can imagine a person by themselves—especially, if I think of them as a body, as embodied. I can stand by myself.

So..., God is indeed one. God is three-in-one. And in our western tradition, the emphasis has been: God is indeed one: three, but one. And that emphasis has allowed our tradition to imagine God as solitary and separated from us and from the rest of creation.

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The tendency in the Orthodox tradition was to emphasize that God is three, or at least to be absolutely sure not to lose sight of three, when we affirm that God is one.

And this is the way the contemporary Reformed theologians have absorbed that gift. God is three and is always three and is always relating one Person of the Deity to the other... God is one, so the three are related; they are in relationship to one another always, and thus God is never separate. If you imagine three apples, they are in one frame as it were. They are three together. I can imagine them one here, one there and one there, but it's not the tendency. They are three, and they are always in relation one to another because they are three. They have, as it were, one name: three. And the gift in this view is that God is never an isolated singularity. Relationality, relationship then, is inherent in God. And so God is never separate from us.

God does not relate to us as an option among other options, as if God could choose not to be in relationship. God's relationship to us is not a condescension or a subsequent development in God. It is who God is ever and always. God is relationship. Relationship isn't an option; it is in God's being. It is who God is... and, more wonderful than that is that the character of that connectedness, that relatedness, is ... love.

This is the way Michael Lindvall put it in his book, The Christian Life: A Geography of God: "Not only *does* this God love, but this God *is* love. God not only longs for relationship, but this God *is*—in God's very "self," by God's very "nature"—loving relationship. This is perhaps the most transforming affirmation imbedded in the Trinity, the core truth at the heart of that mystery: an understanding of God who *is* love, a God who *is* relationship, a God who *is* communion."¹

You might say that the oneness is the relationship—the love. It is one love that binds God together and binds God to us.

Because God is three, God can never not be in relationship, and God is in relationship as love and not solitary. And neither then are we, created as we are in God's image and with this God who is relationality. We are not alone—nothing can separate us from God, because God is relationship.

One brief note about the music before we hear another piece of orthodox chant: you'll hear slightly different scales here—notes in the spaces between our western piano keys. And you'll hear a drone, a pedal tone, a note that's held, while the single melody line moves in relationship to it. So, let's hear one of the many ways that the orthodox tradition celebrates and communicates this Triune God. And for this piece I would have you listen to what happens particularly when the music gets to the Trinity—glory to the Father, the Son and the Spirit.

¹ Michael Lindvall, The Christian Life: A Geography of God, Geneva Press, Louisville, KY, 2001, p. 56.

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Let your ear drums vibrate. Let us continue together and worship God.

[The choir under the leadership of Cantor Nicholas Ayoub offered the “Thrice-Holy Hymn” —a traditional Athonite Melody.]

To my ears, when the music got to the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the music began to dance. And in this next piece there will be even more a sense of dance: a stately almost courtly dance. And the dance is not incidental or merely ornament.

Another of the gracious gifts of the Orthodox understanding of the Trinity is a little Greek word: *perichoresis*. *Perichoresis* is a technical theological term: *peri*—around, like “periscope”—and *choresis*, like choreography, “dance.” “Dancing around” is what it means. The relationship, the way that the persons of the Trinity relate to one another is that they dance around together. And that image drives some of the music. And this is also the posture of God toward us. God is ever in our lives, inviting us to the dance. Later on this summer, I’m going to offer a meditation on the dance of the divine, that dance to which God is inviting us. For now, we need but remember that the Trinity says, “There is no God alone—there is only God dancing with us. And there is therefore no ‘us alone.’ There is only an ‘us’ with God for us.” Emmanuel—the very name of God means God is with us. As now we know so does the name Trinity: God’s very name means we are never alone.

Let us continue in our worship and praise God with song and dance.

[The sermon was followed by “Doxasticon from Pentecost” —attributed to Byzantine Emperor, Leo VI (866-912).]

The end of the service—an introduction to the Bach closing voluntary:

Here at the end we return to the Western musical tradition. Helen is going to play the three movements of Bach’s Fugue in E-flat minor. A word about it: it was written to celebrate the Trinity; it is a triple fugue. The first sounds very much like “Our God Our Help in Ages Past.” The second is a steady stream of eighth notes to which the first theme is joined. And then the third is in three and is quite dance-like, as if our two great traditions were indeed on the same page... And the opening theme returns down below in the pedal. We invite you to stay, to drink in this last gift today of praise of the Trinity.

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