

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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You will note that this passage from John's gospel mentions all three persons of the Trinity which is a principal reason for its being selected for today's appointed reading on Trinity Sunday. The Christian idea of the trinity is somewhat unique in that today is the only day on the church calendar devoted to *a Church doctrine*. It is not scriptural; rather, it is a theological concept of the institutional church which developed in the first four centuries in the Common Era. It is based on scriptural references, but nowhere in the New Testament is the word trinity used. Nowhere is it a developed idea. It is a concept which grew out of the experience of the early believers.

For example, if you look just at today's passage, you will find references to Jesus, God the Father, and *the spirit of truth* --- or the Paraclete, the Advocate, the Holy Spirit. So, all three persons in some kind of close relationship, but no full concept of three in one.

A noted religion professor at Princeton has explained it this way:

*There are probably a number of people who imagine that the idea of the Trinity was thought up by ivory-tower theologians who, typically, were making things more complicated than they needed to be and were obscuring the simple faith of regular believers. In fact, it seems that the process worked pretty much the other way around. Practicing believers and worshipers were driven by their experiences of God's activity to the awareness that God related in several different ways to the creation... Thus, what these believers came to insist upon was that God had to be recognized as being in different forms of relationship with the creation, in ways at least like different persons, and that all these ways were divine, that is, were of God.*

*Yet there could not be three gods. God, to be the biblical God and the only God of all, had to be one God. This complex and profound faith was then handed over for the theologians to try and make more intelligible. They have been trying ever since.*

In this sense, then, the doctrine of the Trinity is our human attempt to use words to define God --- and none of our words or images will be adequate to capture all of God. Another way of saying this is that this doctrine was “originally formulated to...give words to the faith.”

When Jesus says that his disciples “cannot bear” the many things he would like to tell them, he is using the word “bear” in the sense of “to take up or carry,” which is akin to Jesus carrying his own cross. It would ordinarily be too heavy to lift or carry in the same sense in which certain words or ideas are too complex or confusing for us to understand --- at least at first.

Later they will be able to comprehend better, and the Spirit of Truth will lead them there. And this recalls what Jesus told Peter when he asked him to wash his feet: “you do not know what I am doing, but later you will understand.” The concept of the Trinity would also have been too difficult to digest at the moment when Jesus addressed his disciples in this passage. The truth will be revealed over time, God’ time. It is the task of the Spirit to guide or lead into all truth.

There are actually three aspects of the “function of the Spirit: to convince the world concerning *sinfulness, righteousness and judgment*. For John, sinfulness is centered in unbelief. Righteousness is made known in Jesus’ death. It is vindicated in his resurrection. In that death and resurrection, “the ruler(s) of the world” is sentenced, judged and rendered powerless over God’s children. The work of the *spirit of truth* glorifies or makes present Jesus. Jesus is the one who has glorified or made present the love of the Father in the world. In receiving what is of Jesus, the announcing work of the Spirit of truth continues to make God’s presence known.”

There is nowhere in the gospels where there is more talk about the Holy Spirit than in John’s chapter 16. And because John talks so much about the Spirit, the three persons of the Trinity come to be viewed by us as “discrete persons.” The other persons can be distinguished but not separated. And these are all characteristics of the Trinity as later developed. In the West, we tend to depict the Trinity as a triangle, but in the East, they do so by way of a circle. The circle conveys the idea of *a kind of strange circular dance* of the three persons in God. And the dance is a connecting feature of that dance, a *linking* one.

It is interesting to speculate about what the author of John’s gospel would have thought of the notion of the Trinity. Since that debate occurred in the 4<sup>th</sup> century rather than the first, it is most likely that a formalized trinitarian dogma would have struck him as a complete mystery.

The trinitarian controversies occupied some of the best minds of the fourth and fifth centuries. The theologians of the period were divided into two main camps: (1) the

"Nicene party," i.e. those who supported the Nicene Creed (AD 325) and its formulation of *co-equality* between the Father, Son, and Spirit, and (2) the "subordinationist party," which argued that while Jesus was divine in some sense, he was also "subordinate" in some way to the Father.

The debate was vigorous, intense, loud, and not always characterized by the most civil of behavior. The debate was also, unfortunately, short-circuited by the Emperor Theodosius in AD 380 who decreed that, from then on, the only acceptable theology belonged to the "Nicene party." Writings and arguments of the "subordinationist party" were suppressed. That tendency to suppress a minority position is not a tradition which has served us well over time. It is, in fact, a very unfortunate legacy of the era when Christianity became a state religion. It is certainly to be regretted that those on the losing side in such debates have essentially been vilified.

If we simply look at the four very different versions of the narrative of the life of Jesus in the Gospel accounts, we can see the advantage that comes from a variety of outlooks. By contrast, the contentious atmosphere in Christianity in that period of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries is named by some scholars as one of the reasons for the success of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> century --- Islam with its stripped-down version of monotheism born out of the conflict that led to the formulation of the Trinity as a dogma of the church.

Whatever its origins, the trinity expresses some true things, such as: God's interior life is one of relationship. God is relentlessly and integrally relational. God the Father is not at the top of the heap, while Jesus is some kind of "junior god" a notch or two down. The trinity is not top-down, but co-equal. The trinity is not static. The early Greek Christians, using the circle metaphor, relied on the word *perichoresis*--"dancing around"--to describe the interior life of Father, Son, and Spirit. *Perichoresis* is a term of movement, dynamism, and color.

In John's gospel, the focus is on Jesus and the Spirit. This does not mean that God the Father is ignored. Rather, it means that John's narrative puts more emphasis on Jesus the teacher and the Spirit of truth which, after his departure, will remind the disciples of the thrust of his ministry. He could have devalued any new understanding of that message because of his emphasis on the incarnation, but instead he "places firm confidence" in the Spirit as continuing the ongoing presence and revelation of Jesus within the Christian community after his return to God the Father. Thus, for John, the church need not fear learning and practicing its faith in Jesus in the midst of a changing world marked by the absence of Jesus. This is because the overall function of the Spirit is to lead to a deeper understanding of what Jesus was preaching and teaching. And this will be accomplished *without betraying the core truth* of his original revelation of God.

In John's gospel, "the revelation that took place in and through Jesus is fundamental to Christian identity." Nevertheless, the reality is that he was going to leave his disciples behind with a less

than satisfactory understanding of his ministry. The revelation of God in Jesus is fundamental and eternal, but it could not be sustained without the continuing work of the Spirit of Truth. That is the basic thrust of this very short passage from the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of St. John, a passage which for all its brevity proved fundamental to the later development of the idea of the Trinity.

When people tell me they have difficulty with some of the concepts in the Nicene Creed, I tell them that they need to look at it as something to which the institutional church subscribes by way of definition of itself expressed in the language of the fourth century. Thus, not so much something that is demanded of us individually. So, today when we say the Nicene Creed together, let us try to regard it as an historic document of the church rather than as a laundry list of specific beliefs to which one must subscribe in order to be considered a follower of Jesus of Nazareth. The faithful Christian is defined by the extent to which he or she wishes to follow the example of Jesus and wishes to pattern his or her life on his. And that desire to follow our Lord, to be authentic, must be accompanied by action in the world to love God and our neighbor and to treat every human being as a child of God with essential integrity worthy of protection.

Amen.

(Sources: Gilberto Ruiz, “Commentary on John 16: 12-15,” Working Preacher; Scott Hoezee, “Trinity Sunday C, May 16, 2016,” *Center for Excellence in Preaching*, Calvin Seminary; Paul S. Berge, “The Announcing World of the Paraclete: Easter to Trinity with the Gospel of John,” *Word and World Texts in Context*, Luther NW Theol. Seminary, 1995; Brian Stoffregen, “John 16: 12-15,” *Exegetical Notes*, Crossmarks; John Petty, “The Holy Trinity – John 16: 12-15,” Progressive Involvement, May 16, 2016.)