

May I have this dance?

Sunday, Sept. 24, 2017
Hyde Park Mennonite Fellowship, Boise, Idaho
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John 14:15-21, 25-27 (*the Inclusive Bible*)

¹⁵If you love me and obey the command I give you, ¹⁶I will ask the One who sent me to give you another Advocate, another Helper to be with you always - ¹⁷the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot accept since the world neither sees her nor recognizes her; but you can recognize the Spirit because she remains with you and will be within you. ¹⁸I won't leave you orphaned; I will come back to you. ¹⁹A little while now and the world will see me no more; but you'll see me; because I live, and you will live as well. ²⁰On that day you'll know that I am in God and you are in me, and I am in you. ²¹Those who obey the commandments are the ones who love me, and those who love me will be loved by our God. I, too, will love them and will reveal myself to them."

²⁵This much have I said to you while still with you; ²⁶but the Advocate, the Holy Spirit whom God will send in my name, will instruct you in everything and she will remind you of all that I told you. ²⁷Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; but the kind of peace I give you is not like the world's peace. Don't let your hearts be distressed; don't be fearful.

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Every so often the *Christian Century* magazine publishes a series: *How my Mind Has Changed*. That could have been the title of this sermon, but instead I chose: *May I have this dance?* I hope that title will make some sense by the time I sit down!

The topic for today's worship, the Trinity, was chosen by one of you. It might seem a bit esoteric or irrelevant to some, but for me, it's been the biggest mind-changer of the past 20 years or so. My mind has been changed by the Trinity, and I hope my life and behavior are being transformed as well.

Not everybody believes in the Trinity, not even all Christians. And this particular doctrine has been a challenge for both Judaism and Islam in conversation with Christians.

For about 20 years, I taught a course at AMBS called Christian Formation in the Congregation. On the first day of class, I usually asked students to choose a number from 1 to 10 to signify the importance of the doctrine of the Trinity - to them or their congregation.

For many years, most students answered, "I'd give it a 2 or possibly 3 - nothing higher. It's not all that important."

Toward the end of those years, some students began answering with higher numbers: 5 or possible 6. I discovered it was usually the United Methodist students, not Mennonites, who responded with higher numbers.

When I asked them why, Methodists said it was because they hear the language of the Trinity every Sunday in their prayers and benedictions.

Karl Rahner, the German Jesuit theologian, said:

We must admit that should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false tomorrow, 95% of our lives would remain unchanged.

And then he went on to write a very significant book about the Trinity.

Yet in many of our churches there seem to be very few practical or pastoral implications of this understanding of God. It makes we wonder if we are missing something by our benign neglect of the Trinity.

It's true that the New Testament doesn't use the word Trinity. Tertullian in the early 3rd century is usually credited with being the first to use the word in connection with God's nature and activity (the Council of Nicea, 325 AD, accepted the doctrine of Trinity as an orthodox Christian belief).

Yet without explicit language for the Trinity, early Christians seemed to have an intuition about Trinity that provided the foundation for this theological concept to develop.

In Matthew 28, we hear the formula used by the first Christians to express that intuition -- which has become part of our baptism rubrics:

“I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son
and of the Holy Spirit;”
or in other words: “Be baptized into the identity of the Trinity.”

So what does that mean?

And we have the text we heard this morning from John 14 in which Jesus speaks of his unity with God the Father and also of the Holy Spirit's presence in that unity - *her* presence, if we're being true to the original language.

What does this mean?

Like all people of faith, the first Christians tried to find language to name or express their experience of God. And it's clear that their experience of God was complex:

they knew **God** as Creator of the world,

the creative source of all that exists:
they knew **Jesus** as the incarnation of God,
the one who embodied God's presence and God's way;
they also knew the moment-by-moment experience of God's **Spirit**,
the companion who guided them, energized them,
kept them on the way.

So how do you name or describe such a complex experience?

One response of early Christians was to use similes and metaphors...

God is like this...or like that...

A particular metaphor of the early Greek theologians was the word *perichoresis*: this word signifies a cyclical movement, a revolving action, like the revolution of a wheel; or it could mean: *to dance round*, or *to dance in a ring*.

What *perichoresis* means is that whatever is going on in God is a flow, a flow like a dance. God is not the dancer. *God is the dance*.

In other words, within God is a continuing flow of love, of mutual self-giving - and from that inner flow of love comes forth a continuing flow of love into the world - a love that invites a response.

Perhaps we see this best in Rublev's icon of the Trinity where the figures at the table represent God as Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. But the table is open... we are invited into that joyful fellowship.

Whatever is happening in God cannot be hidden, cannot be stopped - it is far too powerful a movement.

It must flow.

One of our problems with the Trinity is mathematical:

God is One.

God is Three.

We make of that conundrum an arithmetic problem. Or we try to explain it with three-leafed shamrocks or water in three forms: solid, liquid and gas.

And these comparisons may have some value.

But the early Christian intuition was not to start with One but with Three - because all we know is the flow, the movement, the unhindered giving of God, the loving.

So, in this understanding, God is not a noun. God is not Love - static noun, but Loving - a verb.

If we start with God as One, we get a monarch - and the Trinity becomes a pyramid scheme. That's what always happens when there's only one - one is an absolute ruler, and dominates the rest, who are subordinates.

But if Trinity is the heart of who God is, if God is *not monarchy*, but *community*, then we need a different image. And that's where the circle image becomes useful - a round dance, where God *is* the dance...not a dancer.

From the dance, Jesus moves out... "May I have this dance," Jesus says, and pulls us in.

We are not outsiders in this dance.

What Jesus, the Incarnate One, shows us is that God can't keep God's hands off us - like a lover who is constantly wanting to touch her beloved.

In the post-Easter story, we find a very intimate image: Jesus breathes on the disciples,
shares the Spirit with them...inhale, exhale, we breathe God's Spirit.

Or in Romans 8:26, another intimate image: the Spirit prays in us, groans within us as we long for the healing of ourselves and all creation.

This view of Trinity means that all of reality is relational. Modern science already tells us about the interconnectedness of all things - and so it shouldn't be a big leap for us to recognize that everything is connected...in God.

And...when we try to be autonomous, we resist the very warp and woof of the universe.

When we look at the saints, we see what it's like to go with the flow...St. Francis singing joyfully with the birds and the sun and the moon.

Sin is stopping the flow - refusing to breathe in and breathe out...

I have a friend who says in moments of stress or hurry or worry:

Breathe, just breathe ...

and it's an amazing practice. When we breathe in and breathe out - we're connected to reality again, to grace, to goodness, to love.

So when we stop breathing, when we refuse to be connected, when we turn away from community and refuse mutuality ...that is when **we sin**. We could

see Adam and Eve's expulsion from the garden as leaving the dance...falling out of the flow.

This flow of life and love has little to do with us - or our perfection. It has all to do with yielding - with trusting, with allowing, with what the early Anabaptists called *Gelassenheit*: being with - being present to - being connected - including when we struggle to be with another person or group.

And that's how my mind was changed. That's how the Trinity came to be a 10 in my thinking.

I think my first "God" was Jesus, a Jewish man, because those were the stories I heard first as a child: Jesus healing, Jesus teaching, Jesus welcoming little children.

And then the God of the Old Testament became part of my understanding: the One who showed up in a dream in the desert or in a burning bush or met Moses in a cloud on Mt. Sinai - mysterious, faraway, and quite often given to judgment.

The Holy Spirit was a much later addition - through the lens of charismatic religion and then contemplative spirituality.

Three nouns. But when we see God as a noun, we tend to see an abstraction or a state of being - something static. But if God is more like a verb, a continuing action, an unhindered flow of life, making life out of death - then God is always on the move, always in process.

This is actually a very Jewish understanding of God, one that pre-dates Christianity. In a radio interview by Krista Tippett with Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, known as the Chief Rabbi of the UK, the rabbi said:

When Moses at the burning bush says to God, "Who are you?"

God says to him three words: Hayah asher hayah.

Those words are mistranslated in English as "I am that which I am."

(that would be the static NOUN).

In Hebrew, it means "I will be who or how or where I will be,"

meaning, Don't think you can predict me. I am a God who is going to surprise you ... This God is bigger than religion, the rabbi says.

*(Tippett, *Becoming Wise*, 189)*

I will be who or how or where I will be is process language, not a noun. It's more like: *I will be what I am doing.*

That reminds me of how Jesus answered the disciples of John the Baptist who came to ask him asking, Are you the One who is to come, the Messiah we've been expecting?

Jesus did not answer their question directly, didn't give himself a name or identity; instead he said: What are you seeing and hearing?

*The blind are receiving sight,
the lame are walking, the lepers are being cleansed,
the deaf hear, the dead are raised,
the poor are hearing good news.*

In other words, God is on the move. Do you recognize what God's activity looks like?

So what does this flow look like in our ordinary, everyday lives?

Perhaps the simplest way we see the Trinity in action is when someone is holding a baby: many of us are drawn irresistibly to babies, so when we look at the baby and smile, the baby smiles back - and probably jumps and wiggles... the baby can't stop the flow! And neither can we!

Or consider the way we respond to huge tragedies - such as storms like Harvey and Irma and others. What's the phrase that is always used? "*The community came together to respond, to help each other.*" For a few days and weeks, the barriers that normally isolate us, fall away - we all call the people we know who are in jeopardy, we reach for our checkbooks and write checks, we lean in toward the television screen to hear the latest news, we are joined in compassion, in community, in a way we wish were always true - the flow of Trinity.

Or think about sex - there's a good topic for reflection on Sunday morning! Two married people give themselves to each other in freedom, joy, complete self-giving -that is what the flow of Trinity looks like.

Or singing. When I interviewed people for the book, *Singing: A Mennonite Voice*, one interviewee said:

*When we sing, we all lift our lungs;
we breathe in and out together;
we keep the pitch together.
What I am doing with my body
connects me with other bodies -
even bodies of the past.
We sustain the spirits of the past
through this physical act of singing.*

Another interviewee said:

I can love my church better when we sing together.

Singing is an essential way we experience the Trinity together - so don't stop singing!

Ultimately, how the Trinity changed my mind is that I came to see that God is no longer a separate something but a part of every molecule, every atom in creation - always present in everyone and everything, always loving, always on the move. And I'm called to the same love. I'm called to turn away from every kind of separation - whether that's gender, race, religion, or politics. Whatever keeps us apart is **not** what God is doing in the world.

Will we dance? That is the question.

Jesus Christ is waiting -- #30 SJ

*Jesus Christ is dancing, dancing in the streets,
Where each sign of hatred, he with love defeats.
Listen, Lord Jesus, I should triumph too.
Where good conquers evil, let me dance with you.*