

Trinity Sunday who we are named after is the only Sunday in the lectionary where we focus upon a doctrine of the church. For many of us, we first heard of this doctrine at our baptism when we were baptized in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Our understanding of the doctrine may not have improved much since that baptism we do not remember. But we do not need to feel bad about that, for theologians, philosophers and others have been trying to explain the doctrine of the Trinity for as long as it existed. To give you the history briefly, we only get hints in scripture with no explanation, places where the three persons are mentioned such as our reading today from Matthew. The doctrine of the Trinity was developed to settle an ongoing argument that needed a resolution since church life at that time permeated the lives of the people. There was no separation of church and state and people discussed matters of the church in much the same way we discuss politics today. The argument came to head when Arius insisted that Jesus was a created being and did not share the full divinity of God. After much debate at the Council of Nicea in the year 325, the doctrine of the Trinity affirmed that God is three persons equal in power, eternity and wisdom but one substance. Can you see why this is hard to understand? Even Augustine had difficulty explaining.

So if it is so difficult, you may ask, why do we hold onto a doctrine even the experts cannot explain? Why not unload the baggage of previous centuries and move on? The answer to these questions is yes, it is time to let go of old baggage, but rather than totally ditching the doctrine, we could search for some kernels of wisdom found within and in spite of all that theological language we could uncover new metaphors to breathe new life into this old doctrine, so that we may know what it means to be baptized in the name of the Trinity.

The trinity is all about relationship and enacting that relationship. There are a couple of metaphors I have found helpful. One of the ways this relationship could be envisioned is the concept of *ubuntu*, a word from the Nguni language in Africa which Desmond Tutu describes as meaning that "my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound, in yours ... a person is a person through other persons." "A person with *ubuntu*," Tutu says, "is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole." *Ubuntu* allows communities to heal and reconcile. In South Africa in the aftermath of apartheid, *ubuntu* inspired the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and put an end to the spiral of violence that had enveloped so much of the nation. The tortured could look in the eye the very people who had tortured them and say, "What you did to me was a crime because I am a human being and not an animal. And you are responsible for it because you are a human being and not an animal. My humanity is tied up in yours. My humanity is affirmed by my choice today to treat you as a human being, who even now can make the choice not to behave hurtfully. Wounding you and punishing you will not heal me. I forgive you."

Sarah Dylan remarks If *ubuntu* is the fundamental reality of our relationships, human dignity is not a limited good -- and the more I honor you, the more honor there is for me. If *ubuntu* is the fundamental reality of our relationships, I don't have to worry about whether another person is getting off too easily. I don't have to fret about whether my colleague, my rival, or my enemy is being treated better than they deserve. If *ubuntu* is the fundamental reality of our relationships -- if it's true that my humanity is inextricably bound in yours and honoring your humanity affirms mine -- there is more than enough mercy to go around, and it is possible, as the prophet Amos writes, for justice to roll down like waters, and righteousness like an EVER-flowing stream (Amos 5:24). And if Ubuntu operates within the Trinity and between the Trinity and it us, it means that our

relationship with the divine is always active and dynamic, our humanity being ever strengthened and it is always moving out to include others.

And if we take the idea of relationship further, we find some help from Greek thought. They use the term *perichoresis* to describe the Trinity which is the Greek word for dance. Eugene Peterson asks us to imagine a folk dance with three partners in each set. The music starts up, probably some form of folk music or a jig. The three partners holding hands begin moving in a circle. Then they hear the signal from the caller; they release hands, change partners, and weave in and out, swinging first one partner and then another. The tempo of the music increases, the partners move more swiftly with and between and among one another, swinging and twirling, embracing and releasing, holding on and letting go. To the onlooker the movements are so swift it is impossible at times to distinguish one person from another; the steps are so intricate that it is difficult to anticipate the actual configurations as they appear: There is no confusion, every movement is cleanly coordinated in precise rhythms, as each person maintains his or her own identity. As the music slows again, the first three come back together in their circle, their work for that song accomplished.<sup>1</sup> God is the Creator, and is also creative, obviously. The work of creating is always active, always evolving, encouraging new and exciting things to happen. Jesus is the one who shows us how to live, how to embody grace and spread the Good News of the gospel for the good of all. Jesus shows us how to be ethical. And the spirit is the advocate that leads us to prayer, inspiration, being fully present with God and one another, also called the mystical. So the Trinity, then, is the dance of the creative, the ethical and the mystical.

We join into this marvelous thing as we remember we are made in the image of this Trinity which is the dance grounded in Love. God needs Creation, needs to forgive, needs to unify in love in order to be God. Dylan remarks we also need others, need to forgive, need to unify to become most fully our true self, the self God made us to be. God's self is revealed in Creation, in the forgiveness spoken from the cross, in every relationship that bears the fruit of the Spirit; we find our self in God as we enter into those relationships with others, as we love them in ways that are creative and self-giving and uniting, as we experience God's love through them. The Triune God is *ubuntu*, is love found in loving, is unity in relationship, lived out in the dance.

At the core of the relationship is love. Thomas Merton tells us that love is our true destiny. We do not find the meaning of life by ourselves alone -- we find it with another. We do not discover the secret of our lives merely by study and calculation in our own isolated meditations. The meaning of our life is a secret that has to be revealed to us in love, by the one we love. And if this love is unreal, the secret will not be found, the meaning will never reveal itself, the message will never be decoded. At best, we will receive a scrambled and partial message, one that will deceive and confuse us. We will never feel real until we let ourselves fall in love -- either with another human person or with God.

If we tie all these images together we can see that the basis of the Trinity is grounded in a love that reaffirms the identity of everyone and is expressed in a relationship dance that seeks to include everyone. That is something we can understand, something we can hold onto, something all people are invited to participate in. It is not static nor does it limit itself for the Trinity keeps enlargening the circle until the whole universe takes part. The trinity now holds out a hand to all us, asking to you, care to dance?

And if we dare to take that hand, we will see what wonderful creative, ethical and mystical things could be in store of us as individuals and as a community. So strike up the music and let's dance!