



## Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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### “A House of Love”

Matthew 28:16-20

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Today is Trinity Sunday, but who cares? People with cancer probably don't care. Couples dealing with infertility probably don't care. Who cares? What about employees facing difficulties at work? Or teens worried about the future of our planet? Does it really matter to them that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

I have a hunch that they just want to know that God is God, and that God somehow knows who they are, what they are dealing with, and what they need. Today is Trinity Sunday, but who cares? Well, here's the deal. I'm the preacher today, and I care!<sup>1</sup>

Today is the only Sunday of the Christian year when the church celebrates a doctrine; not an event, like the birth of Jesus, but an *idea*. Christian theology proclaims a mystery, a divine mathematical mystery: One plus one plus one equals One. Father, Son and Holy Spirit equal one God.

Our lectionary reading likely was selected simply because it mentions all three persons of the Trinity. We call it the Great Commission: Go, make disciples, baptize.

Earlier in worship we used God's Triune name when we baptized Avery Adelaide and Hunter Hanna in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

That's the historic, universal Christian name given to God, the way we name God at every baptism. We baptize with water and with these words. Every time we name a specific, particular human being and we name God.

In Matthew's gospel there's no fully developed doctrine of the Trinity. The question of how the three persons of the Trinity relate to one other isn't Matthew's issue. It's too early in church history for that. Instead, the gospel writer captures a more pressing problem—how Jesus motivates eleven timid followers to go out into a frightening world and share good news.

Jesus says, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” But nothing around him supports that claim. There's no Broad Street Presbyterian Church. There's no First Congregational down the street, no Bexley United Methodist, no Vineyard, no First Community Church. There's no Vatican, no Iona, no Camino de Santiago, no enormous crowds. Jesus stands on an unnamed mountain in rural Galilee with a congregation of eleven, down from twelve the week before.

Jesus tells them to go and make disciples of all nations. “Nations” doesn't mean ‘nations’ in the modern sense of nation-states, but foreigners, tribes of people who aren't like us, “Gentiles.”

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<sup>1</sup> Bartlett and Taylor, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 3, pp. 44-49. With appreciation for articles written by Steven P. Eason and Thomas G. Long, which have guided this sermon.

Telling the eleven to invite all people to be disciples, to baptize and teach—it's a tall order. It's like me saying to you, "Go into the world. Clean up the environment. Cure cancer. Evangelize folks resistant to religion. And while you're at it, establish world peace."

It's impossible. And that's the point. The Great Commission drops the disciples completely onto the mercy of God. What's crystal clear is that "all authority" doesn't belong to them. All authority comes from God and God alone. The eleven can only do this by participating in the same power available to Jesus; the power of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Trinity Sunday is a day to talk about this God. Mysterious as the Trinity sounds, this doctrine tells us important things: that God is One and the way God is one is in relationship. And the character of that relationship is *love*.

It is a challenge to portray the Trinity. Some of you may be familiar with the story *The Shack*. It sold over 20 million copies as a novel. Many facing loss have found it deeply moving. *The Shack* is now also a movie.

It's the story of a man named Mack. While on a camping trip his youngest daughter, Missy, disappears. Before long, evidence turns up that she's been murdered, in a shack in the woods.

Mack can't forgive himself for not keeping his daughter safe. He carries sadness as a great weight. He's also intensely angry. He rages at the perpetrator as well as at God. One day he receives a letter in his mailbox. The note invites him to the shack, that place of torture and death. It's signed "Papa," which is what his young daughter called God. He struggles with what to do. He goes to the shack and ends up meeting God, the Trinity.

How would you cast the Trinity? What a creative challenge! Directors of *The Shack* passed by actor Morgan Freeman. They chose another suitably divine Oscar winner-actress Octavia Spencer. She plays God the Father, called "Papa." And there are others with her: a slim Asian woman, who is Spirit, called Sarayu, and a Middle Eastern man who is Jesus, called Yeshua. The Trinity.

Anytime we contemplate the unfathomable fullness of God we leave certainty behind. *The Shack's* artistic decision to cast three individuals as Trinity emphasizes God's three-ness and reminds us how difficult this is to portray. It's a risk we take whenever we try to make the spiritual concrete. What we create might end up looking and sounding odd.

Mack hears the Trinity before seeing the Trinity. The first indicator is the sound of their laughter. That's my favorite detail; the sound of the three laughing together. Mack meets each of them in turn and then asks, "Are there more of you?" The three look at one another and laugh... "No, Mackenzie." Octavia Spencer chuckles as only she can do: "We is all that you get, and believe me, we're more than enough."<sup>2</sup> It's true. They are a handful. Together they take Mack's pain seriously. They show him a new way of being in relationship with God, as well as with the perpetrator, and with himself. Later Mack remarks that he loves the way they treat one another. He says, "It's certainly not how I expected God to be."<sup>3</sup>

Consider how we expect God to be. Consider how easy it is to make God in our own image, how much we rely on certainty rather than God.

The Trinity perplexes Mack. He wants to know who's in charge. "Isn't one of you more the boss than the other two?" It's a great question, an important question. The answer is 'no'. Through the centuries the church has

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<sup>2</sup> William Paul Young, *The Shack*, p. 87.

<sup>3</sup> IBID, p. 123.

resisted the Trinity having a chain of command. Instead, the Trinity is a circle of relationship; equality without an overlay of power.<sup>4</sup>

Imagine God as divine community. In Greek the word is *koinonia*, which means fellowship. Imagine God in deep, mutual, healthy fellowship within Godself. This is why I think the Trinity matters. Trinity says that the center of reality isn't solitary, but relational, an intimate, hospitable friendship. So when our culture's love of rugged individualism tricks me into thinking I have to do hard things alone, the Trinity reminds me that the heart of reality is relational, that I am meant to be connected with others, to depend on others, that we are meant to be in *koinonia* with one another. This is why I care about Trinity Sunday.

Henri Nouwen, twentieth-century Dutch theologian and author, went through a time of deep depression. He spent hours gazing on an icon, the one on our bulletin cover, the classic Russian icon of the Trinity painted by Andrei Rublev. Notice Rublev leaves the fourth side of the table open, as if to invite the viewer, as if to invite us, to come closer, to sit at the table and be part of the sacred circle.

Nouwen writes about his experience in his book *Behold the Beauty of the Lord*. He says that gradually, over many months, through that image, he came to know the Trinity as a Community of Love, a House of Love. In that household there was no fear, or greed, no anger, or violence, no anxiety; no pain or suffering, not even words, only love, enduring love and deepening trust. It was a house, he said, in which he could dwell forever.<sup>5</sup>

Trinity Sunday is a day to talk about God and with God as a House of Love, a healthy community filled with laughter. When we speak the Triune name we are talking about the mystery at the very center of existence. The same God who in the beginning created life also walked the earth as Jesus. The One who experienced crucifixion at the same time experienced the death of a beloved child. The One who ascended into heaven is the same One groaning deep within our souls for the redemption and care of creation. When we baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we say that the One who created and redeemed in the past is still creating and redeeming now, is still on the move, and that this House of Love will continue sustaining all things.<sup>6</sup>

Trinity Sunday is a challenging day for concrete thinkers, and that's okay.

Matthew's gospel ends with the words of Jesus. Jesus sounds solid as a rock. All authority, all nations, go, baptize, teach. He gives the disciples the Great Commission—an impossible task. But he also gives a Great Promise—his presence with them, "I am with you always." And when he is present, the House of Love is present. Three in One. With us ... always. With you ... always. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> IBID, p. 124.

<sup>5</sup> Op. cit., Bartlett and Taylor, *Feasting on the Word*, p 30.

<sup>6</sup> Adapted from Shannon Johnson Kershner's sermon, *Slanted Truth*, June 11, 2006.