

**Meadowbrook Congregational Church**  
**June 7, 2009**  
**“Three In One”**  
**Reverend Art Ritter**

**John 3:1-17**

*3 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. <sup>2</sup> He came to Jesus by night and said to him, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.’ <sup>3</sup> Jesus answered him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’ <sup>4</sup> Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?’ <sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup> What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup> Do not be astonished that I said to you, “You must be born from above.” <sup>8</sup> The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.’ <sup>9</sup> Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can these things be?’ <sup>10</sup> Jesus answered him, ‘Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?*

*11 ‘Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. <sup>12</sup> If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup> And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*

*16 ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

*17 ‘Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

Sometimes truth is difficult to understand. In 1997, a student at Eagle Rock Junior High School in Idaho Falls, ID won first prize in a local science fair by his project which urged people to control or ban the chemical “dihydrogen monoxide.” The student listed the dangers of the compound. It can cause excessive sweating and vomiting. It is a major component in acid rain. It can cause severe burns in its gaseous state. Accidental inhalation can kill you. It contributes to the erosion of our natural landscape. It decreases the effectiveness of automobile brakes. It is also found in the tumors of terminal cancer patients. The student developed a website to promote his cause and even had T-Shirts printed with the logo, “Spread the Word about Dihydrogen Monoxide.” Those of you who know anything about science may understand the actual reason the student won the award. Dihydrogen monoxide is water, and the young man was illustrating how easy it is to spread fear and confusion through the use of science.

The universal church calendar designates this particular Sunday as Trinity Sunday. As liturgical holidays go, Trinity Sunday is a fairly new one. It has been celebrated since 1334 when Pope John XXII fixed it as the Sunday following Pentecost. It is the only celebration of the church year that recognizes not an individual but a doctrine. We don’t use any special events or rituals to observe the day. Perhaps that is why it is such a difficult thing to celebrate. Even among card-carrying Trinitarians, the Trinity is a complicated and perplexing subject, likely to cause more confusion and doubt than it can ease. For those who are skeptical about the threefold nature of God, the observance of Trinity Sunday may be nothing more than an exercise in total frustration.

Essentially the doctrine of the Trinity says that there is one God but that this God has three persons. We call them Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. All three are of the same substance. All three are one. Each is infinite in power and wisdom and strength.

Just to be clear about things myself, I visited an internet web site this week to see what other clergy might be saying about the Trinity in their sermons. I found this paragraph which attempted to explain things rather well. Eric in Ohio wrote, "In Western theology, the explanation of the Trinity is focused on three or four latinized terms: coexistence- all three persons of the Trinity exist together; coinherence- all persons mutually indwell in one another; consubstantiality- that all three persons share one being; and circuminsession- that all three persons are active in the activities of each one." I think you will agree that Eric in Ohio has explained things quite simply and clearly! He has certainly illustrated the problems of explaining the Trinity.

The doctrine of the Trinity has been a source of controversy for centuries. Is it God in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit-one in three? Or is it the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit together in God- three in one? Years and years ago the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit was a source of intense theological debate. The distinction you would make about how and where God was present in each of the persons of the Trinity made you either a heretic or a candidate for sainthood. Because the stakes were so high, one's position on the issue was crucial to one's future in the church.

The Trinity isn't good math. One plus one plus one doesn't equal one. The Trinity isn't rational. Do you want to believe in one God yet worship three? And there are all sorts of other complications. How can God live in human flesh? If God was in Jesus, then who was up there running the universe when Jesus was down here? Was it God who died on the cross that Good Friday? And if it was God, then who raised Jesus from the grave on Easter? Good questions, all!

The Trinity isn't even Biblical. The standard Trinitarian formula is only mentioned once in Scripture when shortly before his ascension into heaven the Risen Christ encourages his followers "to baptize others in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." According to most historians, the word Trinity was first used to describe God in the second century by the early church leader Tertullian.

Throughout the years the concept of the Trinity has been described through analogies. God is like a clover, growing in the meadow, with three different leaves. God is like water, available in the substance of your choice- liquid from the tap, ice from your freezer, or the steam from your morning shower. In his book *To Begin at the Beginning*, Martin Copenhaver describes our modern yearning to describe the Trinity in such analogies as a tag-team wrestling match. When one image of God can't handle our needs, it tags another and gets out of the ring so we can send another image in to take on the evils of darkness.

Despite all of this, I think it is important for us to contemplate the idea of God in three persons at least once a year. It is important because the Trinity is an essential part of the substance of Christian faith. It is important because I believe the Trinity is not just a theological doctrine or mathematical puzzle. Instead it is a belief born out of the experience of ordinary Christians as a real life answer to the question, "Where do we find God?" The Trinity is a way for us to know that the God who was present at creation, and the God who came in the person of Jesus the Christ, is the same God who works in us and through us this very day. The Trinity is not simply a teaching to be imposed upon our skeptical minds. It is a celebration of a relationship between God and the people of God.

There is a familiar story that every preacher has used at least once. A little girl was drawing a picture in a Sunday School class, totally focused on what she knew would be a fantastic creation. Her teacher walked by and asked the girl what she was drawing. "I am drawing a picture of God," the little girl said. The teacher replied, "But dear, nobody knows what God looks like." Without any hesitation the little girl answered back, "They will when I'm through with this picture!"

The concept of the Trinity is very much like that little girl's drawing. It paints a picture of God that helps us understand what God is all about. It is a portrait of God that we can put our hands upon and our arms around. In the symbol of the Trinity, God becomes a personal thing, described in the kind of relational terms we can all understand.

The concept of the Trinity is something else. It defines the greatness of God, greatness that words fail to grasp. God is the source of all that is and was and ever will be. God is the source of power that keeps creation and the universe in relative order. At one time God came to earth in the form of a human being, born as we are all born, living through joy and sorrow just as we must live, and dying a human death just as we must die. And God dwells with each of us today, inspiring us, teaching us, comforting us, and encouraging us. How can you describe such a presence? The metaphor provided by the doctrine of the Trinity implies that God is great enough to be beyond our understanding yet as near as our every breath. That is power. That is greatness.

Why do we bother with Trinity Sunday? Why should we cling to a doctrine that we can't explain to ourselves, much less to the questioning of others? Perhaps because it really does help us explain the power and presence of God in our world and in our lives. Peter Gomes, professor and chaplain at Harvard University writes, "We must remember that the object of Christian theology is not to reduce incomprehensibilities to our small size but rather to make us grow up in some small degree to the capacity of the subject...The Trinity is the attempt of the church to paint the big picture of God and to understand it in ways that extend and expand the ordinary consciousness."

Yes, it is probably a good idea to reflect upon the significance of the Trinity this day. The Trinity allows us to consider the entire being of God. It helps us to get a grasp on the mystery and the greatness. It offers us metaphors to gain some understanding of how God is with us in our daily lives. It informs us as to who God was, who God is, and who God will be.