

## The First Dance

Many of you have been captivated by the Netflix documentary on the Chicago Bulls NBA championships and the dynamics leading up to their last championship. The 1998 season in which the Bulls looked to win their 6th championship was termed, “the Last Dance” because some contracts with coaches and players were coming up for renewal and many of them anticipated that this was their last chance to play together.

Throughout the series, it becomes increasingly clear that Michael Jordan’s basketball talent and competitive drive were second to none. His dominance as a player and a motivator leaves no doubt about who was leading this last dance. The series leaves you with the question of “What if?” - Could the bulls have won another championship if they hadn’t been dismantled?

Last dances have an air of sadness about them, don’t they? The party is about to end and the night is drawing to a close and the person you couldn’t get up the nerve to ask to dance is leaving early. *Stairway to Heaven* is playing and then all the lights come on and you realize this magical time is over and your standing in a gloomy, pungent, school gym and it’s time to go back to reality.

Last Dances are sad. But do you remember your first dance?

First dances are exciting and terrifying, aren’t they? You have no idea what to do or what’s going to happen and who will be there. They are often filled with awkward gangly teenagers who are still trying to figure out how their bodies move and so putting them all together in a room and having them bounce around just seems hilarious. First Dances are fun, even if sometimes they are a bit disastrous.

Last week Pastor Dave shared with us the move of the Holy Spirit as it blew into the lives of the first Christians and signalled the expansive sweep of the gospel through the world. They were invited into a first dance and God

enabled and empowered them on the day of Pentecost. The first believers join the work of God and he and enlivens the empty-tomb movement. And I just love the way Dave described it when he said, “Love is going to spread everywhere to everyone!”

Today our texts for the week lead us to think about the way in which the Spirit and Son of God were always present and apart of the work of God.

Now, Trinity is not a biblical term. You won’t find it anywhere in the scriptures and because of that, you can imagine how difficult it may have been for the early church to discern and formulate the idea. (Sometimes it’s hard enough to decide on paint colour, can you imagine trying to agree on the nature of God?) On the one hand, the word trinity isn’t used explicitly, but on the other, there are many references to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And we see in our passages today from 2 Corinthians and Matthew that Paul and Jesus don’t hesitate to use this triune way of describing God.

You might have noticed this week that Paul puts Christ first in his formulation as opposed to the typical turn of phrase that Jesus’ uses in Matthew Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The New Testament references reflect the early church’s understanding and wrestling with how to describe the nature of the God who had sent his Son and Spirit. This God was rooted in the Jewish idea of monotheism and yet was revealed in his Son Jesus and active through the Holy Spirit.

To the Jewish mind Yahweh or, “the One who is,” was the sovereign creator God. He established the world and ordered it so that humans would reflect his image and steward the earth. This god was distinguished from the other god’s of the near-east in that he was not an objectification of the forces and drives within the world. This god was both separate from the world and intimately involved, especially as He established a covenant relationship with his people Israel.

The definition and description of this God, as opposed to the god's of the near-eastern cultures, distinguished Yahweh as the God who is One. So, while there are references to God's spirit in the Old Testament, and some allusions to the "man of God". The Jewish understanding did not see separate aspects of God's work in the world. God is One.

However, because they recognized that God was the "transcendent" Holy one, and also the immanent and actively involved presence in their current circumstances, they developed a variety of descriptions that attempt to clarify who this God is.

God's Spirit broods over the waters, God's Word goes forth to produce new life, God's Law guides his people, God's Presence or Glory dwells with them in fiery cloud, in tabernacle and temple. God's Wisdom is his handmaid in creation.

Can you see then, that though Israel's God is one, there were at least 5 primary ways that the Jews used to describe the way that this God works and is present in the world? And, it isn't hard to recall the way that Jesus used many of these descriptions in his teaching.

And isn't this how it is for us as well. We also grasp for metaphors and ways of describing God's sovereignty and holiness while at the same time describing him as a God who is near to us, and whose presence comforts us.

We articulate using metaphor and language, word and picture, and yet we can't ever really grasp or accurately describe this mystery. Our words and language fail us.



The story is told of Augustine who after working thirty years to complete his treatise on the Trinity was strolling along the beach and came upon a young boy. The boy was scooping up water from the ocean with a shell and transferring it carefully to a hole that he had dug in the sand. “What are you doing?” Augustine asked.

“I’m going to put the entire ocean into this hole,” replied the boy.

“What?” said Augustine. “That is impossible, my dear child, the sea is so great and the shell and the hole are so little.”

“That is true,” the boy said. “But, it would be easier and quicker to draw all the water out of the sea and fit it into this hole than for you to fit the mystery of the Trinity and His Divinity into your little intellect; for the Mystery of the Trinity is greater and larger in comparison with your intelligence than is this vast ocean in comparison with this little hole.” And then the child vanished.

“‘Circling around’ is all we can do. Our speaking of God is a search for similes, analogies, and metaphors. All theological language is an approximation, offered tentatively in holy awe. That’s the best human language can achieve. We can say, “It’s like—it’s similar to...,” but we can never say, “It is...” because we are in the realm of beyond, of transcendence, of mystery. And we must—absolutely must—maintain a fundamental humility before the Great Mystery. If we do not, religion always worships

itself and its formulations and never God.” Richard Rohr with Mike Morrell, *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation* (Whitaker House: 2016)

We see in the text from Matthew 28 that Bridget read for us this morning an affirmation of God’s nature and the commissioning of his disciples. Matthew reports that after the resurrection the eleven disciples return to Galilee and go to the mountain. We don’t know where this mountain or hills are but we might expect that they are returning to a familiar landscape where Jesus had gathered and taught his people about the kingdom of God. And the return to Galilee connects us to Jesus’ ministry and teaching there. This meeting in this place is significant. It brings us back to Jesus humble beginnings and reminds us that the empty tomb movement is rooted in the mission of God’s kingdom breaking through to earth. These hills echo with his teaching that the poor and oppressed will inherit the earth. This place reminds us of the kind of love that turns the cheek and reaches out to our enemies. The flowers and the birds that were visible bring back to mind his encouragement to trust in the God who provides.

The disciples see Jesus and some of them fall down and worship. They are immediately moved to bring honour to Christ. But some doubted. Who are these that are doubting? We might wonder why any of the eleven disciples are still doubting since by other gospel accounts they may have already seen the risen Jesus twice. It could be that Matthew is including this to address those in his own community are still wrestling with doubts about the resurrected Jesus. Or it may be that there were more than just the eleven gathering there in the hills. Perhaps the eleven stirred up some excitement on their way and others started to follow. Seeing Jesus they weren’t sure who he was, they hesitated, they doubted.

Whatever the case Jesus approaches them and says, “All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” In his earthly ministry, Jesus had authority. His words were authoritative. His forgiveness was authoritative. But now we see that his sphere of authority is expanded to include heaven

and earth. He is given all authority and shares in all power just as God himself acts to create and order the heavens and the earth.

Jesus commands his disciples to go into all the nations and carry his teachings with them. In the past weeks, we have reflected on how the early Church was birthed, dispersed, and empowered to carry out this command. They took the gospel beyond their culture and national boundaries and allowed it to take root in families, synagogue, marketplace, and political forum.

And what does Jesus say the response to discipleship is? Being baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is a sign of entrance into the Messiah's covenant community and a pledge of submission to Jesus' lordship. A relationship is established through baptism that marks us as a special people. And it is under the acknowledgement of the Trinity that this covenant is made.

Last fall we had the honour of baptizing many of our youth and children. It's a shame to think that we can't offer this sacrament at this time. But I have seen some creative ways that some ministers have been using water guns to baptize their people, and you know, the Church of the Nazarene recognizes all three ways of baptism. So I'm sure we can figure it out if you want to take this step.

Finally, Jesus assures his disciples this great promise: "I am with you always, to the very end of the age." Throughout the gospel of Matthew, we have been encouraged that God is with us in Jesus, that when we gather for worship Jesus is present, and now at the end of the story, Jesus tells the disciples he will always be with them.

I think especially in these recent times, I've been encouraged by this thought. That even in isolation, even if only a couple of us can meet together (although some of you are pushing the boundaries), even when we

are on our own, we have a holy and yet immanent presence that never leaves us nor forsakes us.

And these days as we recognize the very real suffering of our world; as we hear the cries for justice in the face of racism and systemic injustice; as we witness the inequity of resources that will doom some countries and communities in response to the coronavirus; and as we continue to wrestle with the ways that we can respond - may the Lord be with us and may the Lord help us.

As the early church wrestled with how to describe this triune nature of God, one idea that took root was that of Perichoresis. From the Greek word for rotation, the word literally means to make room for around each other. It is a word that describes the intimacy of a relationship that is unified and yet moves for the others that make up that unity.

And the picture that it leaves us with is one of a divine dance. A dance in which there is such intimacy in relationship that the partners are always moving in concert with each other, for each other, and in each other. It reminds us of the intimate description that Jesus used in John 17 when he said, "That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us."

It is the dance of God. The nature of God. A dance of love and mutual self-giving. The first dance.

And the most remarkable thing about this dance is that we are invited to join in. Now, remember, first dances can be awkward and terrifying. But I wonder if, on a day like today, some of us aren't waiting to join in and respond to the invitation?

The invitation is  
To us who are worshipping and doubting

It's for those who need  
Power to do a mission not jeopardized by their weaknesses nor limited by  
their uncertainties.

And it welcomes those who need a promise of the divine presence in their  
lives today.

Prepare for Communion

Benediction

And now may the Lord bless you and keep you  
May the Lord draw you into the dance  
And help you learn the unforced rhythms of grace  
The Lord turn his face toward you  
That you might experience his self-giving love  
May the Lord make his face to shine upon you  
And bring you his peace  
Amen



Author Michael Reeves, the author of the book *Delighting in the Trinity*, expresses our basic problem with the Trinity—that the Trinity is "seen not as a solution and a delight, but as an oddity and a problem." Reeves explains:

In fact, some of the ways people talk about the Trinity only seem to reinforce the idea. Think, for example, of all those desperate-sounding illustrations. "The Trinity," some helpful soul explains "is a bit like an egg, where there is the shell, the yolk, and the white, and yet it is all one egg!" "No" says another, "the Trinity is more like a shamrock leaf: that's one leaf, but it's got three bits sticking out. Just like the Father, Son, and Spirit." And one wonders why the world laughs. For whether the Trinity is compared to shrubbery, streaky bacon, the three states of H<sub>2</sub>O, or a three-headed giant, it begins to sound, well, bizarre, like some pointless and unsightly growth on our understanding of God, one that could surely be lopped off with no consequence other than a universal sigh of relief.

That beautifully balanced doctrine of the Trinity came in the fourth century, after church leaders reflected on how God exists as a unity of three equally divine and equally eternal Persons. The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God—three divine Persons sharing one divine nature. The doctrine was eventually summarized in the Nicene Creed.

-Nicea in response to Arius

-Pope and Rabbi joke

-Finding language for God: "'Circling around' is all we can do. Our speaking of God is a search for similes, analogies, and metaphors. All theological language is an approximation, offered tentatively in holy awe. That's the best human language can achieve. We can say, "It's like—it's similar to...", but we can never say, "It is..." because we are in the realm of beyond, of transcendence, of mystery. And we must—absolutely must—maintain a fundamental humility before the Great Mystery. If we do not, religion always worships itself and its formulations and never God." Richard Rohr with Mike Morrell, *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation* (Whitaker House: 2016)