**Isaiah 6:1-8**

**Romans 8:12-17**

**John 3:1-17**

Welcome to Trinity Sunday: a lesser known church occasion but still significant enough to warrant the color white. Except for the occasional baptism, you will not see the altar and clergy bedecked in white again *on a Sunday* until Christ the King Sunday, the last week before Advent. That’s 26 Sundays from now.

So today is important in the life of our church and our faith. Today we celebrate a doctrine. Trinity Sunday is famous for being the only time we celebrate a church doctrine rather than an event, like the resurrection at Easter or the incarnation at Christmas. And to make matters more obscure, the name of this doctrine – Trinity – is nowhere to be found in the Bible.

And honestly, we do not need to make the matter more obscure. Trinitarian theology has that distinction in its own right. It is the belief that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one yet are three. And if the traditional language is unsettling for you: newer, more modern language is perfectly acceptable: Creator; Redeemer; Sanctifier.

Very few theologians make as much sense about the Trinity as Richard Rohr, Franciscan priest and spokesman for a vibrant Christian faith. He reminds us that early Christians imagined the Trinity as a dance; specifically, a circle dance. They imagined an unending flow of giving and receiving among Father, Son, and Spirit where God is not only a dancer, but God is the Dance itself. Going one easy step beyond, Richard says this is, in fact, the pattern of reality.[[1]](#footnote-1) Give; receive; give again; receive back once more.

If you get nothing more out of Trinitarian theology, then that alone is worth it: that reality is a cycle of give and receive. So many people think reality is a system of take-take-take. They spend their lives anxiously clutching whatever they have in fear that it will be taken away. Give and receive is the operating system of the universe.

Richard Rohr has more to say about the Holy Trinity:

Trinitarian theology was almost made-to-order to confound the logical mind. If actually considered and then contemplated, God as trinity breaks down the binary, either-or system of the brain. To encounter the Trinity makes us patient before Mystery and humbles our judgmental, dualistic minds.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Having just said that, I am now going to become shamelessly dualistic. I want to contrast two different ways of being Christian. One way regards Christianity as a “system of truth.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Which it certainly is. But taken to the extreme, truth-seeking becomes an exhausting exercise in morality. Morals are seldom absolute. Yes, we must teach our kids morals and reinforce them by stressing that there’s no excuse for “being bad” or doing bad things. But the black-and-white clarity of youth inevitably gives way to the grays of adulthood.

For example, the Bible condemns divorce. The Bible is clear about saying it is a bad thing. Nevertheless, both the Old and New Testaments identify precedents for divorce and give procedures for how divorce can be enacted.

Christianity as a system of truth. There’s another way to regard Christianity: as a “system of relationship.” Granted that, too, can be taken to extremes. One shortcoming of a relational model is how we want to ascribe qualities of goodness and desirability to everyone we know. But not everyone is good, and not every good person is purely, utterly, thoroughgoing-ly good.

The criminal justice system can help us out here. It has a neat way of labeling those people who are “not good” without calling them “bad.” They are called “anti-social.” They have “anti-social tendencies” which are typified by a lack of remorse or the inability to feel what another feels. Their lack of empathy can cause them to do very bad things.

Christianity as a system of relationship can’t have a better expression than the doctrine of the Trinity. Three who are one: the Father with the Son and Spirit; the Son with the Spirit and the Father, and the Spirit with Father and Son. This one, solitary, unified God is a community of love flowing round and through each other. Some theologians like to use the word “interpenetrate.” Each person of the Trinity interpenetrates each other. This is ultimate vulnerability, openness, and free-flowing love.

This being Trinity Sunday, and my assertion being that Christianity is a system of relationship, I thought I’d become rather personal and offer how it is that I relate to the Trinity.

By far the most intriguing relationship is with the Holy Spirit. Scripture has much to say about the Spirit as teacher, guide, comforter; companion. There is tenderness here. In fact, First Thessalonians warns, “Do not quench the Holy Spirit.” Rather, learn to decipher how the Spirit is with you. There is a distinctive feel to it each of us has to learn. I am not a horseback rider but I know very subtle movements of the rider’s body can direct the horse. Very subtle movements of the Spirit can direct us if we learn how to listen and feel.

Here’s a recent example. I agreed to write a devotional message for Together Colorado, the faith-based, community-organizing group that works on issues of social justice. My timeframe was a month. For a month I thought about what I would write. I tossed around many themes.

About a week-and-a-half before the deadline, I finally landed on an idea. A brilliant idea! Full of insight and nuance! I started writing but felt inner resistance to this topic. I’m no stranger to writer’s block so I plowed on. But the more I wrote, the more unease I felt. Reluctantly I abandoned this topic.

I started another. Still a lot of resistance. I started yet another. More resistance. I claim that as the Spirit’s influence. You can call it intuition if you like but I experience it as a subtle form of conversation and “in-tune-ness” with God. Finally I hit on something that had never entered my mind and wasn’t at all what I wanted to say to this interfaith, politically-oriented organization. But the devotion wrote itself. Whoosh, and it was done.

I’ve had to learn what the gentle, restraining energy of the Spirit feels like. I’ve also had to learn what the counterpart to restraint feels like. That’s the empowering energy of the Spirit. Quite often I am more than content to sit and listen but I may feel the Spirit prompting me to speak up, or do something, or go in a certain direction that in some respects, isn’t really my idea. This is never harsh or condemning. Which is why it can take time to learn. God’s Spirit always uses a carrot; never a stick.

My relationship with Jesus is different. He is my friend. I can say things to him that I can’t say to anyone else or can barely admit to myself. He is also my exemplar, meaning “my example” or inspiration. When I am absolutely resolved that I will never again be good and kind and loving to someone because of what he or she has done to someone I love or to me, I remember the cross. We make a lot of Jesus being the Divine Son of God. But he was also human. It was a dying man shaking with pain who forgave his torturers during his execution. If that’s so, maybe I can do a little better.

My relationship with God the Father is different still. I don’t think too often of God as Father because that’s too anthropomorphic for me; too human. Fathers aren’t perfect so why should I liken the radiance and purity and splendor of God to a human parent. I think of God as Creator and Giver. In fact, scripture says that every good gift and every perfect gift is from God.

The key dynamic in my relationship with God is gratitude. I would not expect that to be the case for everyone. Just as every marriage is different, so everyone’s relationship with God is different. But gratitude – expressing itself in worship and praise and song – is the chief characteristic of my kinship with the Holy One.

I know the early church labored over how the Trinity could be: three-in-one who are separate but united. They labored over how Trinity related to itself, or himself or herself. But I don’t know if they spent much time wondering how we relate to Trinity. It’s perfectly OK to pray to Jesus, or to the Holy Spirit, or to God. It’s perfectly fine to have three different ways of relating to the Divine Life – or more! Because holiness doesn’t reside in things. It is in relationship that we experience holiness.

1. http://thedivinedance.org/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Quoted from *The Naked Now* in Synthesis, a weekly sermons-help publication, PNMSI Publishing Co., Boyds, MD, May 27, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This notion is taken from the work of Francis Schaeffer as quoted in *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church*, by James K.A. Smith, Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, MI, 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)