

## A TRIUNE GOD?

**A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan  
University Public Worship  
Stanford Memorial Church  
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What does it mean that Christians have a triune God? At the very end of the Gospel of Matthew, after the resurrected Jesus has first appeared to Mary Magdalene and another woman outside the tomb in Jerusalem, Jesus meets with his eleven male disciples in Galilee<sup>i</sup> more than 100 miles away.<sup>ii</sup> He says, as you've just heard in this morning's Gospel lesson,<sup>iii</sup> "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." My HarperCollins Study Bible drops a note here to say "This explicit trinitarian formula is rare in the New Testament and probably derives from early Christian worship."<sup>iv</sup> In fact there is no developed doctrine of the Trinity in the Bible.<sup>v</sup> Yet, it comes later, as the Christian community develops, and ultimately it comes in the decisions of theologians at the Councils of Nicea and Constantinople in the fourth century A.D.<sup>vi</sup>

Now, as you'll notice, on the top of today's order of service, this is Trinity Sunday. It's also the first Sunday after Pentecost. Pentecost marks the coming of the Holy Spirit to earth fifty days after Passover.<sup>vii</sup> As described in the Book of Acts, it's a very dramatic event. All the disciples are gathered together in one place: "And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit."<sup>viii</sup> No doubt you've noticed that's what's portrayed here on the chancel: Sukey Bryan's twelve panels can be seen as powerful images, indeed, of the tongues of fire of the Holy Spirit.

So what's a Unitarian like me to do and say on Trinity Sunday, with ascension of Christ displayed before you in above in stained glass, and the flames of the Holy Spirit leaping up below? You might not be surprised that I rushed to my Episcopal colleague, Joanne Sanders, pleading for help with my sermon before she left for a short vacation in Los Angeles. Luckily, she supplied me with three substantial resources on the Trinity, which I've done my best to digest.

I've titled this sermon "A Triune God?" [question mark]. "Triune" is a word that dates back to the early 1600's, according to my Webster's dictionary. It's derived from the Latin words for three (*tri-*) and one (*unus*). At least since the fourth century, Christians have understood God to be three in one, and one in three -- a triune God.<sup>ix</sup> What exactly does this mean? The Nicene Creed, which many Christians still regularly repeat today, begins this way, "We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth." And then it goes on to say that "We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father." Finally, it references the third part of the Triune God: "We believe in the Holy Spirit, the

Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets."

Now, for my Unitarian forebearers, this was all a bit more than they could handle. They emphasized the monotheistic God of the Old Testament, and they claimed that the early Christian church in fact saw the Father as superior to the Son, in general giving him the title of God, as distinguished from the Son.<sup>x</sup> As for Jesus, the Son, they saw him as a unique moral exemplar and teacher, helping human beings reach their full dignity and ability to love.<sup>xi</sup> Unitarian minister Ralph Waldo Emerson spoke of the Holy Spirit as a metaphor for the heavens passing into the human mind, as the human ability to drink from the soul of God, as the courage to love God directly -- without any mediator or veil. Yet, Emerson was clear that while God may enter into each of us in important ways, only God is God, and God is one, not three.<sup>xii</sup>

But this is Trinity Sunday, my friends, and as a modern Unitarian who also affirms himself as fully committed Christian, I'm going to have to try to do better than that. We do have a gospel text to struggle with, now known as the Great Commission, where Jesus sends his followers out to baptize all nations with the Trinitarian formula -- "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." And that's exactly how we did it in our baptisms here last Sunday.

My conclusion for you, to state it at the outset, is that the great Christian innovation among the religions of the world is seeing God first and foremost as love.<sup>xiii</sup> To properly explicate love, one needs to see it not just abstractly as a natural law of the universe emanating from that creator God who was described in the reading today from Genesis.<sup>xiv</sup> There's also a need for a flesh-and-blood human exemplar of love incarnate. And then it's also important to have a sense of love shared in community, as breath or fire that moves among us and unites us all. Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Or, avoiding patriarchal imagery: parental Mother-Father love, friendship unto death, and beloved community. Different ways of seeing the one God -- in the universe and in our world. The Trinity constitutes three different windows on the one God of love.

Let's briefly look at some of the other Biblical bases for the church's doctrine of the Trinity. Early in the gospel of Matthew, when Jesus himself is baptized by John, the text reads: "Suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."<sup>xv</sup> All the elements are there: The Father showing his love for his Son not only through words but also through the medium of the Holy Spirit alighting on the Son. This is the same Holy Spirit that Jesus refers to at the Last Supper with his disciples. When he is no longer on earth, Jesus explains, "the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you."<sup>xvi</sup> There's the link between the love of the parent, the love of the companion-mentor, and the love that builds community over time. Then, sure enough, the Holy Spirit does descend on the disciples in wind and fire on Pentecost. Saint Paul later ends his second letter to the Christian community in Corinth by saying "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you."<sup>xvii</sup> The creator's infinite love, the grace of the human incarnation, Jesus, and the sense of communion with each other that the Holy Spirit continues to provide -- all these aspects come together to form a complete picture of the

power of the one God in our lives. Perhaps another way of seeing through these three windows to God is to think of the transcendent God of the universe (out there as the creator of all we know in nature), the God who walks by our side in human form and suffers along with us (knowing suffering in the extreme of crucifixion), and the God who is deep within our own souls, but also working as the soul force that ties us together in community with each other. This is one God, but one who can feel quite different in an operational sense, like three modes of being.

One of the theological texts that Joanne lent me explains that the doctrine of the Trinity "did not fall down from heaven, nor was it etched in tablets of stone. It is the product of the reflection of the church on the gospel message over many centuries. The doctrine of the Trinity is second-order reflection on the workings of divine love attested in Scripture and experienced by the Christian community. In other words, the starting point of Trinitarian faith is the good news of the love of God in Christ that continues to work transformingly in the world by the Holy Spirit."<sup>xviii</sup>

This theologian, Daniel Migliore, who teaches at Princeton Theological Seminary, claims that what he calls "the dance of trinitarian love" has far reaching implications: God the creator -- God the parent -- is experienced not as a God of absolute power and rule of force, but as one who gives both life and love ... as one who empowers by pointing to caring family relationships. God in human form befriends the poor and forgives sinners. We are all redeemed through the direct experience of unconditional love played out on the human stage; that's the compassion for the hungry, the estranged, the homeless, the sick, the imprisoned which Jesus consistently showed. And then we are sustained by a vision of genuine, inclusive community and just sharing of the earth's resources that moves us beyond all petty divisions of race, class, gender and provides a positive sense of solidarity -- a sense of being one in the spirit.<sup>xix</sup>

I experienced this in concrete form during the last 5 years that I lived in Boston, just before moving here to Stanford. I used to meet every two weeks with three other Unitarian Universalist Christian ministers and a Catholic spiritual director for Bible study, prayer, and personal development. We found a constant interplay between our awe in the face of the transcendent creator of the universe, our appreciation for the loving accompaniment we felt from Jesus as one who knew suffering and joy at infinite levels, and our comfort in being bound together by a force that felt so much stronger than anything which could tear us apart. I remember one time in particular when one of us had to face the gunfire death of a fifteen-year-old boy in her inner-city church's summer work program. He was a good kid, as so often happens -- friendly, cooperative, hard-working, bright. He was just hanging around with the wrong people at the wrong time. A huge, emotional funeral gave some release and some sense of hope to her parishioners. Yet, behind the scenes, my fellow minister was devastated. In fact, she was deeply discouraged and depressed. Our group came together around her, expressing how our hearts ached with hers. We verbalized our anger: "Children should not die, and we adults should not make available the tools of destruction, which kids can neither control nor comprehend." We cried with her and sat in silence with her. Jesus on the cross was the pervasive image for us in our prayers. Yet, we also spoke of the creator God's ultimate goodness and unconditional love. Paraphrasing Martin Luther King, Jr., the universe bends towards justice and towards love. And we remembered all the time that

God was with us and among us in spirit; we were bathed by love for each other and joined to the larger community which we hoped someday could become truly beloved.<sup>xx</sup>

So there we were, Unitarians living out a Trinitarian understanding of God. The triune God had us in his grip, or her grip, just as surely as our espoused theology would have said that God is one, God is one, God is one. "Holy, Holy, Holy, merciful and mighty! God in three persons, blessed Trinity."

## NOTES

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- <sup>i</sup> See Matthew 28, especially 9-10 and 16-20.
- <sup>ii</sup> Arthur Blessit, "How Far Did Jesus and Mary Walk?" [www.blessit.com/jesuswalked.html](http://www.blessit.com/jesuswalked.html)
- <sup>iii</sup> Matthew 28: 16-20.
- <sup>iv</sup> The HarperCollins Study Bible (New Revised Standard Version, 1993), p. 1914.
- <sup>v</sup> The New Interpreter's Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), Vol. viii, p. 504.
- <sup>vi</sup> The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion (HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), p. 1100.
- <sup>vii</sup> HarperCollins Study Bible, Note 2.1, p. 2060; See also The Concise Columbia Encyclopedia (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 652.
- <sup>viii</sup> Acts 2: 1-4.
- <sup>ix</sup> Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (1997), p. 1265.
- <sup>x</sup> See citations from Joseph Priestly's 1792 book, An History of the Corruptions of Christianity (1792), as quoted in David Robinson, The Unitarians and the Universalists (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985), pp. 22-23.
- <sup>xi</sup> Conrad Wright, Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism: Channing, Emerson, Parker (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), p. 17.
- <sup>xii</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Divinity School Address" (1838) as reproduced in Wright, Three Prophets, pp. 96-98, 102, 108, 112.
- <sup>xiii</sup> See, for example, I John 4:7-12; John 3:16; Romans 8: 35-39. For a comparative religion perspective, see Huston Smith, The World's Religions (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), pp. 325-327.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Genesis 1: 1-5.
- <sup>xv</sup> Matthew 3: 16-17.
- <sup>xvi</sup> John 14: 26.
- <sup>xvii</sup> 2 Corinthians 13: 13.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Daniel L. Migliore, Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), p. 59.
- <sup>xix</sup> Ibid., pp. 63, 70-71
- <sup>xx</sup> This story was originally told in Scotty McLennan, Finding Your Religion: When the Faith You Grew Up With Has Lost Its Meaning (HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), pp. 111-112.