

# The Trinity: One God, Three-Way?

## *A Sermon from Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church*

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**Scripture Readings: Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; Psalm 8; Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15**

I was in my early thirties when I attended seminary as a single mother with three daughters. I thought I was going to be the oldest person on campus, but there were seminarians of all ages, including Henrietta Wilkinson, an educator who was studying with the help of her social security check. (Seems there is nothing about retirement from Christian service in scripture.)

Those were the ancient days when feminists still roamed the earth.

Some of us managed to make ourselves heard in the hallowed halls of educational institutions across the land. It was a time when it was dawning on the faculties and administrations of the seminaries themselves that because they had admitted women and people of color in some numbers, the seminary had changed, and the old curriculum which had been designed (they thought) to turn out generic pastors was really designed to turn out *white male* pastors. I was in seminary with a very brave openly lesbian woman (and an even larger number of closeted gays and lesbians) who were challenging the system as well. Through them we saw that the cookie cutter model seminarian was not just white and male, but straight. We joined forces and “What about us??” was our battle cry. (Alliances like this are not new. Women and gay men have been in the struggle together for a long time. The derogatory term ‘faggot’ came from the fact that gay men were thrown on the fires when witches were burned, as ‘faggots’ for the fires.)

Theological discussions were frequent and lively, as they often are in times of change and growth.

One of the topics among the feminists, gays and lesbians and the people of color, was whether to leave or stay in the church. It was - *is*, after all, a very patriarchal institution. One from which many of us had been excluded for a long time and where many of us were still being excluded. All of us heard plenty of criticism from those outside the church in our circles of liberation work, about our willingness to ‘play the game’ in an organization that contributed to the oppression of so many for so long.

We stayed because we knew that organizations only change from the inside. But that was not all. We felt a call to minister as Christians, and to be Christian is to be connected to the body of Christ, the church. Even when it is broken and imperfect and in need of systemic change . . . we believed in transformation, resurrection, and reformation of the church.

And while there are many, many expressions of the church, some of us had grown up in the Presbyterian church. Others of us had come to this denomination by choice, drawn to a church where we didn’t have to check our brains at the door. All of us had found a home in this denomination, even if we knew we were in for a long, nasty family fight.

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We believed then, and many of us still believe, we have been called to ‘love the church into greater faithfulness.’ In other words, to help with the ongoing work of reformation.

During those tumultuous years, I attended a retreat for Presbyterian clergy women held at a convent, named of course, after Mary. (I don’t remember the exact name: Our Lady of Perpetual Patience or Our Lady of the Inner Springs, or something like that. I know it bore the name of Mary in some form.) The retreat was led by a nun. The topic was the Trinity.

(Frankly, I am surprised in retrospect, that I attended.

I value the Trinity, but preaching about a doctrine instead of a story is not much fun. The Trinity is a mystery, but one that seemed as dry as melba toast to me in those days; it was not a burning issue in my life . . . I went for the community, not the topic.)

When we walked into a space designed by women of faith for women of faith, some of us smiled knowingly at one another. We all knew that each of us as children had wanted to grow up to be nuns. Catherine Gonzales, one of our seminary professors, had noted that little Protestant girls who wanted to be nuns seemed to be an early sign of call. None of us had been exposed to clergy women, because there weren’t any when we grew up. Nuns were the only women we ever saw who were obviously ‘serving God.’ And somewhere deep in our being, we knew we, too, wanted to serve God.

In the convent, all around us were pictures and statues of female saints.

And, because we were well trained Presbyterians, we were supposed to know better and feel at least a little smug that we had risen above such things; such need of saints all over the place.

In the early zeal of the reformation, statues had been removed from churches, many destroyed, and priceless frescoes painted over to simply the sanctuaries and the prayers of believers. We didn’t need saints to intercede on our behalf with God, we had Christ and could pray to God without the intercession of any other.

I wasn’t however feeling smug. I was strangely comforted by all those female names and forms.

The early zeal of those reformers had given way to a more moderate stance. And now, many of our churches are named for people we consider saints, or heroes of the faith. Like Knox Presbyterian and Calvin Presbyterian. And some even use the word, ‘saint’ in the name: Saint Mark, Saint Paul, Saint Andrew, Saint Luke, Saint Matthew, Saint Thomas, Saint Philip, Saint John, even Saint Giles.

At Central Presbyterian Church in Houston, there is a Chapel of the Reformers, and three life-sized bronze statues stand outside: Martin Luther, John Calvin and John Knox.

I was thinking about those church names and those statues as I stood in the chapel of the convent named for a woman, surrounded by statues of female saints . . . and my heart began to ache. Sometimes hard and painful truths make themselves known through absence.

The reformation had not done away with saints.

The reformation had done away with **female** saints.

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I wracked my brain to think of a Protestant church -- it didn't even have to be Presbyterian -- named after a woman.

(Later, much later, I would find that in the Presbyterian Church there does exist **one** church named for a woman. In California, there is a Sojourner Truth Presbyterian Church. As far as I know, it is the only one.) How many Presbyterian churches are named for John Calvin, John Knox, and the thousands named for male saints?

That dark feeling of being excluded lowered like some medieval gate and that gnawing sense of not being good enough, being a second class member of the kin-dom of God surrounded me. I was aware of it, but it hurt again the way only old wounds can hurt.

At the same time I was coming to this reality, the nun who was leading our retreat was in a crisis of her own, though it was similar.

She was leading a group of women who could be ordained in their denomination and that fact brought up her own pain at *not being able to be ordained*. Statues and dead women were okay, and the Catholic church depended heavily on the work of the nuns. They could have a vocation, but they were not ordained. She, too, had run into that dark fence of limited power. Limited lives.

With hearts filled with pain, together we explored our topic, the Trinity, from a new perspective. Specifically: where is the feminine aspect of God?

What does the Trinity mean to me, to others who feel excluded? Hunger can make even dry toast more palatable.

The Trinity is a puzzle and a problem. To say that there is One God, one faith, one baptism and then to talk of three: whether we call that three by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or Speaker, Word and Spirit, or Father-Mother, Beloved, and Spirit, or Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

We say this is a mystery: three persons, one God. We use images to depict it: like a shamrock with three leaves, or three states: like water, mist and ice, but one element, water. Or we use a triangle with three sides.

Most of us are confused about the Trinity. It is hard to explain mysteries. And as I have said, there isn't a story here. But I have found that there is a gift in the Trinity, and it is worth the effort to try to grasp the gift. And there is healing in the leaves of that shamrock for those of us who have felt excluded.

In today's readings, we find God revealing the infinite mystery of God's own self through the Trinity. It is almost as if God is trying to deny any attempt we might make to define God. These texts seem to be the taunting of God: "Don't you dare think you can understand me, the One who brought you into being!"

The text from Proverbs is the one I want to spend the most time on this morning: because here is Wisdom: a feminine presence!

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Joyce Hollyday has written:

“Ah, wisdom. Little did she know at the founding of the world what trouble she would create for late-20th-century churches.

Wisdom is the feminine face of God, the daughter who was "the first of God's acts of long ago" (Proverbs 8:22). She is the one who was present when God established the heavens, spread the skies, marked out the seas - a "master worker" and daily a "delight" to God (8:30).

In the Greek, she is named Sophia. In the New Testament, she appears as the Holy Spirit. She represents strength and creativity, truth and life..”

Walter Wink writes:

“Sophia ("Wisdom") is the feminine aspect of Yahweh, the immanent presence of God in all things, a mild and incomplete compensation for the over-masculinization of God. She is the architect or artificer of creation, working beside God and delighting in each thing made. She was the first of God's creative acts, the principle of creativity. She is called sister, wife, mother, beloved, and teacher. As the hymn to Sophia in Colossians 1:15-20 put it (prior to its identification with Jesus as the Christ), everything was made in and through and for Sophia. Later she was identified with the Logos, or masculine reason, and then, because Jesus was male, she was squeezed out altogether. With her went a large component of the female and feminine in Christianity.

Where do you locate the feminine side of reality? Is there a lesson for the church in the revival of goddess worship? Is it possible to regard God as androgynous, or do we need a variety of God-images: God as Father, God as Mother, God as Lover, as Wisdom, as Friend?

The earliest Christologies depicted Jesus as Wisdom's child (Luke 7:35) or Wisdom incarnate (Matthew 11:19). Just as Jewish wisdom theology used elements of goddess language to speak of the gracious goodness of Israel's God, so Jesus and the early church drew on female imagery to describe the tender compassion of God toward her children (Matthew 11:28-30; see Sirach 24:19; 51:23, 26-27, where the original image is applied to Sophia; and Luke 13:34).

It is characteristic of Wisdom, however, that her voice is not heard (Proverbs 1:20-33). Ignored, Sophia causes us to bait a trap into which we ourselves will fall, and to lay an ambush that takes our own lives (Proverbs 1:17-18).

Perhaps some of the folly that threatens our survival is itself fostered by our over-masculinized images of God. How have we made God the ultimate Dominator? What doctrines and beliefs depict God as an abuser, a torturer, a sadist, a murderer? How might Sophia help us clean up our God-images?”

As Joyce Holladay has also said: “She is a problem for patriarchal Christianity. She is helping to spread the radical idea that women, too, are created in the image of God; that we are all children of a wise and loving Creator; that humankind is infused with the Spirit of a God who is both masculine and feminine-and more.

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Throughout faith history, the Bible has been quoted all too often to uphold evil. The Inquisition, the Crusades, slavery, apartheid, homophobia, the subjugation of women—these and much more have been justified by drawing a tight circle that shuts out humanity deemed "other," based on a narrow and self-serving interpretation of scripture.

But always the Spirit of wisdom and truth has found a way to break through, to convert hearts and change minds. She who was present at the birth of the universe is still alive and well, inviting us always to inclusion and equality.”

The Trinity can be a move toward correction. It is an opening of the fence, and an invitation to those of us who miss the feminine aspect of God. The church -- the **world** -- needs this corrective.

I have found that people think of the Trinity as an isosceles triangle, with the Father at the top and Christ and the Spirit beneath. So the Trinity loses the co-equal nature, and becomes a reinforcement of the hierarchical way of ordering life.

It may work for good management, business, industry and the military, but doesn't work well when we talk about God.

Putting any of the three persons above the others distorts the very nature of God.

I invite you, instead, to think of the Trinity as a circle, with no beginning or ending, no top or bottom, but a relationship, dynamic and moving. A circle dance.

Michaela Bruzzese has written:

“Our God also resists a singular identity or to be bound to a singular form of relating to us. The God who calls us to community is fundamentally a communal being, consisting of three persons. Some say this is because God, as love, spilled over into other "persons" with whom to relate in love. Thus our triune God is a never-ending being in relationship, creating and recreating in love. It is a beautiful image. It could also be, however, that God so loves us, the ones whom "(God) has made...little less than the angels, and crowned...with glory and honor" (Psalm 8:5), that God needed multiple ways to relate to us. God did not want to be limited to one expression of love or relationship, one dimension of caring. Instead, God is Parent/Creator, Beloved Child, and ever-present Spirit. There is no way we can avoid this God!”

And we, too, are created like this God, with the capacity to love extravagantly and elegantly and creatively. It is in our nature to be in community. It is our nature because it is God's nature. A community that values all life and is, at its heart, love that cannot be contained but spills out into all the world.

The celebration of Trinity Sunday following Pentecost is a continued celebration of the liberating work of God in our world today. How appropriate that these two liturgical holidays precede Pride week, where we once again claim God's dream of community, celebration of God's diverse creativity and embrace God's outpouring of love on each and every human being.

## **The Trinity: One God, Three-Way?**

Wisdom/Sophia calls us to speak our truths and break down walls and do our own naming, and continue God's liberating work.

Let us answer Wisdom/Sophia's cry and move into God's future with joy.

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