



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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## A Strange Paradox: The Trinity and Us

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, June 12, 2022*

*The First Sunday after Pentecost: Trinity Sunday*

*Based on Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15*

I am a bonafide theology geek. If you've heard me preach even once, you've figured that out. But even I don't often look at a theological claim and think, "There's a doctrine that could change the world."

Well, today we lift high the doctrine that I believe could really change the world as we know it: the doctrine of the Trinity.

Those are bold words about a theological premise that often reads like a riddle. Fourth century church father St. Gregory of Nyssa was instrumental in developing our understanding of the Trinity. Here's how he lays it out:

*All that the Father is, we see revealed in the Son; all that is the Son's is the Father's also; for the whole Son dwells in the Father, and he has the whole Father dwelling in himself... The Son who exists always in the Father can never be separated from him, nor can the Spirit ever be divided from the Son who through the Spirit works all things. He who receives the Father also receives at the same time the Son and the Spirit.*

Got all that? It's ok if you don't. Since the beginning of the church, people have debated, thrown chairs and yes drawn swords over this doctrine. St. Gregory himself admits how hard this nut is to crack:

*There is between the three a sharing and a differentiation that are beyond words and understanding. Using riddles, as it were, we envisage a strange and paradoxical diversity-in-unity and unity-in-diversity.*

Wow. So if one of the church fathers who formed the very doctrine says it's more a riddle than it is a scientific formula, then it's okay if we're a little confused or at odds on what it all means.

I'm not going to try to clear up the trinitarian mystery in the next 10 minutes. I'm not sure we need to agree or have a clear statement. In this day and age, in the world we inhabit, the power of the Trinity is not how we speak of it. God is still God, no matter what language we use to talk about her.

The power of the Trinity—for our world today—is the very notion that the one holy God is three persons in eternal, interdependent relationship with one another. Father, Son and Holy Spirit—Creator, Christ and Spirit.

And if God's very being is a "strange and paradoxical diversity-in-unity and unity-in-diversity ...," maybe God's world and God's church could be like that, too. Can we dream of this, St. Bart's? Can we embody this? This Trinity Sunday morning, I'm praying we will try.

There is in our time a strong impulse to swing one way or the other: toward diversity that can bear no overlap, no union, where everyone and everything is other, or toward unity that erases difference and asserts one dominant way for all.

That's not the way God operates. Being the almighty one, God have chosen to be the dominant, supreme, solo figure on a throne. Come on—this is the creator of the universe, who set the moon and stars in their courses. This is the great God who spoke into being the birds of the air and whatsoever walks in the paths of the sea.

*This* God has chosen to hold within Godself 3 persons, and each of those persons—Creator, Christ, Spirit—is the one God. They beget one another. They love one another. They need one another.

In John's gospel today, they open that relationship to us, each in a unique way. There are truths Jesus reveals to us, and truths we can hear only from the Spirit. But they both draw from the one source with the Father. And we need all of them to truly receive all that God has in store for us, the children of our interdependent, triune God.

God's world bears the same marks. Diversity-in-unity and unity-in-diversity is like God's signature at the bottom of the masterpiece that is creation. In Genesis, we watch God busily creating a wide array of species, varieties, sizes and kinds. Every part is good, valuable and touched by grace; and it all works together, holds together, as God's creation.

That gracious differentiation and unity is there at Pentecost. We just proclaimed it last week! Acts 2 tells us ... "there were staying in Jerusalem, God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven." The wild wind and fire of the Spirit fell upon the disciples, and "when they heard this rushing sound, a crowd came together, utterly bewildered, because each heard their own language being spoken."

This was not the Tower of Babel, everybody speaking one language that the most powerful group chose and gave everyone else. This is the spirit of the living God, giving us power to sing of God's love in all the languages with all the people of all the nations. And all so that we can form a body that sings even more fully of God ... together.

That unity and diversity: it will be there in the end. Consider this vision from Revelation 7. "After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb."

In this new heaven and new earth, we will be united in love, not uniform in identity. We won't deny or subordinate our differences beneath a tent of uniformity. We won't use our differences to drive wedges and force one another to the ground.

Can we make this real, St. Bart's? I pray that we will. I cannot tell you how often people have said to me, in honesty and love, that they don't see my race when they look at me. How do I tell them that's not a compliment? That I love being black and also being in the one human family, and I don't see one of those

needing to cancel the other out. How do I invite them to glory in our diversity-in-unity and unity-in-diversity?

I ask the same question when I experience the glorious music here at St. Bart's. We speak so often and so powerfully of radical welcome. I wonder what it would be like to more fully welcome the music of a wider array of cultures and generations, including the cultures of many of us who call St Bart's home but do not often hear our home cultures grace this place.

Particularly in our celebrated 11am service, which has an extensive in-person and online life, I wonder how we could proclaim to the world that we are one church with many voices, placed in the heart of a city with even more voices and expressions, and we hear God in it all.

Could we actually listen more to one another's voices? Could we as choir and congregation sing more of one another's songs, without erasing or diminishing anyone? Without segregating based on particular preferences?

We can love European composers, gospel music and Taize chant at the same time. I promise you, we will know more of the mind of God when we each share authentically of how God speaks to us. That fullness leads us to deeper understanding and love for our God who cannot be captured—who chooses not to be captured—in one dominant expression, one culture, one person, or one name.

Three-in-one. One-in-three. God holds this reality within God's own self—a diversity that does not divide and destroy itself, and a unity that remains full of color and differentiation. Can we dream of this? Can we embody this?

This Trinity Sunday, by the grace of God who creates us, God who redeems us, and God who powers our steps, I pray we will try.

Amen.

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