



Shall We Dance?

Matthew 28:16-20

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To the music of Irving Berlin, with effortless grace, Ginger and Fred floated across the dance floor, and we all had a glimpse of heaven. I hope when I get to heaven, I can dance like that, because I sure cannot now. And everyone would remind us that Ginger did it backwards in high heels.

Today is Trinity Sunday. When we think about God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. And you might be saying, well, what do Fred Astaire, Ginger Rodgers, and Irving Berlin have to do with the Trinity? So, let's see ...

It is a joy to be here, and one of the sad things about being invited to come when your pastor is off on a well deserved Sabbath rest is that I don't get to worship with him. But it is a joy to be here with all of you. Thomas was my student at Wesley, and he was a very good student, I would assure you. And I'm sure you see that every Sunday. And what a joy to be accompanying the Cantate singers. They are amazing! And the songs that you have been singing could not possibly work better with my sermon.

First of all, they were singing about shouting and dancing. And then they were singing about how I believe in God even when God is silent. Each week we gather as the community to hear the word of God proclaimed in the scripture and in the sermon and to eat at the table spread before us. And we ask, who is this God? What is this God like? How do we meet God?

Moses asked that question as he stood before a bush that did not burn. What's your name? You're sending me out? They're going to ask, who sent you. Which is another way of saying, 'Who do you think that you are?'

Jesus asked the disciples, 'Who do you say that I am?' Who do we say that God is? How can we talk about God? We've heard these Trinitarian images already woven in our call to worship and our prayers. The people met God the Creator. The psalmist saying, I consider your heavens the work of your fingers; the moon and the stars that you have set in their courses. They met God. They met God when they were led out rushing out of Egypt, out of slavery, through the Red Sea into freedom.

We met God, the Redeemer, in the person of a man. One of us. Who preached, and taught, and healed. A man who gave himself up to death on a cross for us. And who rose on the third day.

And we met God the Sanctifier. We celebrated that last week at Pentecost. The one who makes us holy, filling us with divine breath, coming like a wind, coming like tongues of fire.

Who is this God? What is God like? How do we meet God?

We're faced with important questions. Is the fire in that upper room on Pentecost the same *ruach*, the same wind that swept over the face of creation, the waters in the beginning? Was Jesus fully God and fully man, or just another prophet?

The followers of Christ set out to explore, to examine, to debate, and yes, to argue often violently the answers to these important questions.

And finally, they said, we can explain, we can wrap our heads around all of this through the doctrine of the trinity. Or to borrow a phrase from Winston Churchill, "A riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma."

How can we understand the trinity? Three in one, and one in three.

Now, Thomas tells me that you've been exploring and will continue to explore the sermons of John Wesley. I'm guessing a lot of you have sat down to read them, and you can tell that it's different to read the sermons of someone in the 18th century than someone in the 21st century. But in his sermon on the trinity, Wesley appreciated the challenge of understanding the trinity. It is a mystery he says. We do not require you to believe any mystery, but you do already believe things which you cannot comprehend, he wrote. And that's why the song you just sang is so important ... "I believe in the sun, even when it isn't shining. I believe in love, even when I don't feel it. I believe in God, even when I feel God is silent." And I'm just going to step out here and say, God is never silent, right? We don't always feel it.

That's exactly what Wesley wrote. He said, you believe in the sun, but do you really understand how it moves? What our relationship is? But yet, you believe in the sun. You believe there is such a thing as light. Does it flow from the sun, or another luminous body? And he writes, how is it that when you bring a candle into a room (remember, he had no electric lights, he would have been much happier if he did!) instantly there is light in every corner? And if there are three candles, there is yet one light. You do not understand these things, and yet you believe. You believe there is air, but he said, do you really comprehend or understand? The knowledge, he wrote, the knowledge of the three-one God is interwoven with all true Christian faith, with all vital religion. And think about it, how many things do you use every day that you really don't understand how they work? I mean, do you really understand how your cell phone works? I sure don't. And, I'll be old school, I don't know how television works. We recently installed a tankless water heater; so there on the wall where there used to be a big tank is this little box about the size of a computer and the water goes in and almost instantly it comes out HOT! My husband asked my son, how do you think that works? And my son said, it's a mystery.

Three candles, one light. Think of all the ways we try to explain the trinity? What was the image St. Patrick used? The shamrock, yes. Others use source, river, stream ... root, trunk, branch ... the doctrine of the trinity tells us about God. And it tells us about God's relationship with us.

Theologian Catherine LaCugna wrote, “Trinitarian life is our life. There is one life of the Triune God, a life in which we have graciously been included as partners. A comprehensive plan of God reaching from creation to consummation, in which God and all creatures are destined to exist together. In the mystery of love and communion.”

So now, I am ready to make the connection between the trinity, Fred Astaire, Ginger Rodgers, Irving Berlin, and dancing cheek to cheek.

In the fourth century, the eastern Church fathers developed what is come to be known as the Cappadocian Settlement. Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregroy of Nyssa wrote that there are three hypostaseis (or, the Greek for ‘persons’) and one ousia (substance). God the Creator, God the Redeemer, God the Sanctifier: three persons, one in being. To help us picture this, Gregory of Nyssa used the image of perichoresis. He used the image of dancing around.

The trinity is the three persons of God, dancing around, cheek to cheek to cheek. Co-equal in an eternal relationship of love and communion. A relationship of mutual interdependence. Being in one together. Ginger needed Fred; Fred needed Ginger; and they both needed Irving. It is a partnership of movement. Each dancer is distinct, yet fulfills himself or herself with the other.

Our theologian LaCugna writes about this divine dance: “In interaction, the dancers and observers experience one fluid motion of encircling, encompassing, permeating, enveloping, outstretching. The divine dance is fully personal and interpersonal expressing the essence and unity of God.” She says, “This image forbids us to think of God as solitary.”

The doctrine of the trinity would tell us that God, the Alpha and the Omega, the God who is with us even until the end of the age until all eternity is dancing cheek to cheek to cheek. We are challenged through this doctrine to understand the theologia (the being of God) is a form of life embodied in inclusiveness, community, and freedom. But our exploration of the trinity must not end there. And unfortunately for centuries, theologians focused only on the theologia, the mystery of God, the being of God, this inner working of God to neglect the koinonia (hear the word economy) the economy of God which is the mystery of salvation. How God saves through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. What difference does this make for us? For you see, the doctrine of the trinity is also about us. We are created in the image of God, how God loves us, and saves us, and it shows us how we are in being with one another. The doctrine of the Trinity is about our lives with God and with each another. The wonderful, amazing, joyful mystery of the trinity is that you and I and drawn up into this perichoresis, this divine dance. We cannot be alone. There are no solitary Christians. WE too must be in relationships of communion, relationships of love and equality and inclusiveness. When we join in the dance, we are joining others. We are drawing our neighbors, friends and strangers alike, into our dance. And I think it isn’t just dance; we experience it when we sing. When we raise our voices, speaking words of comfort to those who are in need. Speaking words for those who have no voice to speak up for justice. Those are part of our perichoresis. There is no beginning, there is no end, each of us is a unique hypostasis, each of us is a unique person, created by God. But we are drawn by God into one ousia – one substance. And we experience that fluid motion of encircling, encompassing,

permeating, enveloping, outstretching, when we live in the father, and in the son, and in the holy spirit as disciples, as beloved children of God, as one community.

So I think Irving Berlin really did capture it. "We're in heaven. And our hearts beat so that we can hardly speak. And we seem to find the happiness we seek. When we're here together dancing and singing cheek to cheek."