

The Trinity: A Progressive Understanding Trinity Sunday

Matthew 28:16-20 2 Corinthians 13:11-13
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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The title of this sermon is a bit misleading. It almost assumes that there is specific, modern, progressive way to understand the ancient Doctrine of the Trinity – which many consider to be the very foundation of Christianity itself. There is, in fact, no one “progressive” understanding of anything. Our own College Hill church brochure gives witness to this when it asks, “**What is Progressive Christianity?**” and then answers, “There is no one definition.” But it goes on to state that there are some **basic characteristics**. Let me list those:

1. Willingness to question tradition, including traditional understandings of church doctrines and biblical interpretations
2. Respect of intellectual integrity, including the use of the latest in biblical and scientific knowledge and understanding
3. Acceptance and affirmation of human diversity; ministries of inclusiveness and hospitality
4. Strong emphasis on ministries to promote social justice, peace, and care of the environment and all of God's good creation
5. Centrality of the commandment to “love one another” – a ministry of compassion
6. Outreach to those for whom organized religion has proved ineffectual, irrelevant, or repressive
7. A life of faith is approached as a journey, not a destination

To declare this congregation as “progressive” simply means that there is not only permission, but even a sense of responsibility to take long-held traditional biblical interpretations and theological orthodoxy and hold them up to the light to see if there are alternative ways to understand what the ancient biblical authors and theologians were trying to reveal about their experience of the nature and character of God, humanity, and our relationships.

You may have heard Mark Twain's famous quote that “Sacred cows make the best hamburger.” While not necessarily synonymous with a meat grinder, **a progressive**

approach to Christianity declares that there is nothing about our faith that is exempt or immune from critical analysis, informed questioning, and perhaps even revision (or to use a more Presbyterian term: reformation).

While a majority of Christians are still fearful and threatened by this approach, there are others that find that it is the very search for new understanding itself that makes organized religion in our day and time tolerable. And while much of orthodox theology has long since been reevaluated (including everything from the virgin birth to the miracle stories to the sacrificial atonement explanation for Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection), the Doctrine of the Trinity – the understanding that God reveals God's self in three distinct ways – remains largely untouched.

One way to deal with the mystery of the Trinity, of course, is to simply reject the notion altogether and refuse to engage it anymore. That has largely been the approach of the Unitarians, of whom I have deep respect and regard.

But some of the most progressive Christian theologians have decided that even though they no longer accept the ancient doctrine of the Trinity as written in the Nicene and Apostle's Creeds, they nonetheless seek to remain in the debate over how we understand God in a triune way – as God beyond us, God with us, and God within us. As an example, I like to share the progressive approach taken by now-retired Episcopal Bishop **John Shelby Spong**. He writes:

I feel no great need to preserve the words of my religious past, but I never want to reject the experience of the past that caused the words of my faith story to come into being.

As a Christian, I seek to separate the experience of God, which I regard as eternal, from the traditional words used to explain that experience, which I always regard as time bound and transitory.

When I reject the traditional interpretation I do not reject the experience that I am certain created the interpretive words...

I will fight with doctrines like Incarnation and the Trinity, but I will never dismiss the truth that people were pointing to when these doctrines were first formed... It is by living in the tension between the past and the future that my Christian life is formed. I could not abandon that struggle.

I find these words very helpful, for they help explain where many progressive Christians, perhaps yourself, find themselves in their own journey of faith. It also reiterates that last point of "What is Progressive Christianity?" when it states that a life of faith is approached as a journey, not a destination where one thinks all the answers have been figured out.

As complex and confusing as the **Doctrine of the Trinity** is, I think it originally sought to answer one primary question: **How do we experience God?** That is still a valid question. In fact, how do you experience God? I would guess that there's probably as many different answers as there are human beings.

On one end of the spectrum, some might say that they experience God, as "a great big Teddy Bear who gives me a hug when I need it." On the other end of the

spectrum, some experience God as “the Chief Justice of some kind of universal Supreme Court who’s going to nail me to the wall when I show up for judgment.”

Then there’s the notion that “God is whatever we think God is, that one person’s idea of God is as good as another person’s idea. Therefore, we shouldn’t be judging other people’s religious ideas.” Indeed, this democratic approach seems fair in that everyone gets to have their own idea of God.

Upon close analysis, however, maybe democracy isn’t the best approach after all. For example, what do we do with a mass murderer, like the Son of Sam and others, who believed in a God that told him to kill all those people? Or, what about Fred Phelps and his Westboro Baptist church in Topeka, Kansas? Dubbed by some as the ‘Church of Hate,’ Phelps recently stated quite emphatically, “God does not love everyone – in fact, He hates the majority of mankind, and has purposed to send them to hell when they die.” Would you consider that a valid Christian understanding of the nature and character of God?

What about those who believe that God is some kind of divine terrorist, sending suicidal destruction “in order to get our attention”? Or, a God who intentionally sends earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, tornados, fires and other natural disasters on specific locations as punishment for this or that offense to the divine nature?

All this is a way of saying that I think that it is perfectly justifiable to hold the position that **there are some beliefs about the nature and character of God that are simply incorrect. In other words, just because a person declares oneself to be progressive and inclusive doesn’t mean that any and all boundaries have to be thrown out when it comes to defining our understanding of the nature and character of God.**

Concerning my own understanding of the Trinity, however, I find myself siding with folks like Martin Luther, who at the beginning of the Protestant Reformation stated, “To try to comprehend the Trinity endangers your sanity.” Or John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, who declared, “Bring me a worm that can comprehend a human being, and then I will show you a human being that can comprehend the Triune God.”

In a sermon from last year, the **Rev. Rob Gieselmann**, the Interim Rector at St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church in Belvedere, California summarized it this way, “God is too big for your brain. You cannot capture nor contain God.” He correctly notes that **“Tradition has reduced theological statements about God to writing,”** especially in the creeds, like the Nicene Creed and the Apostles’ Creed. And in a wonderfully progressive approach to the issue, he continues:

The problem with reducing articles of truth to writing is that we end up confusing what is written with the truth itself, the ink with the meaning. **Words are finite, and truth like God is not. The writing merely reflects the truth that has been experienced – the writing cannot and does not contain the truth...**

Remember this: experience precedes the communication. In the case of the Trinity, we experience God as triune before writing the word, “Trinity,” on paper. The words, “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” followed the *experience* of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus, **these three words express some semblance of description of the church’s experience, but they are not the experience itself.**

For example, one person might identify God as "Father," while some other person might identify God as "Parent," or perhaps "Mother." Or "Creator."

It is the experiential relationship being defined that counts, not the word used. No words or creeds can contain God fully – God is much larger than ink and paper and doctrinal pronouncements. Modern Christians are learning just how limiting words can be.

What I appreciate about the approach of progressive Christianity is that it seeks new ways to expand our understanding of God. For quite some time now, "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," have been replaced by many with "Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer." Some even use metaphysical words for God, such as "energy," "wisdom," "light," "justice," and "a force of love."

But in my own journey of faith, much like the biblical authors and the early Christians and theologians themselves, **I personally experience God as being beyond me, with me, and within me. So even as a self-defined progressive Christian, I guess that still makes me a Trinitarian!**

What words would YOU use to explain your experience of God?

Amen.