



**Westminster Presbyterian Church**  
Eugene, Oregon  
“At Home” Worship  
**May 30, 2021**

*Gathering Around God’s Word*

*If you are worshipping with another family member or with children, you are invited to have different voices share and read the various parts of the service. You can also call/FaceTime someone to worship together.  
(If you have a prayer request you would like added to the At- Home Worship service, please email Brooke office@wpceugene.org)*

**CALL TO WORSHIP**

Let us praise God, creator of all that is.

**Let us praise Christ, blessed redeemer.**

Let us praise the Spirit, the sustaining breath of life.

**God, we praise you, blessed Trinity.**

**OPENING HYMN**

*Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!*

*#1*

**CALL TO CONFESSION**

Creation displays the glory of God, but our sin keeps us from rejoicing. Yet Christ carried our sins to the cross, and the Holy Spirit breathes new life into us, so that we can praise God. Let us confess our sins, that we may receive grace.

**PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

**Loving God, you created the world and each one of us in your image. We confess that we have not cared for your world as we should. We have neglected each other, and we have wasted the resources that you created. You ask us to live in peace, yet we hold grudges and create divisiveness. Forgive us God and strengthen us to honor your creation and your creatures. Give us courage to follow Jesus and to share the good news of your love for all. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.**

**DECLARATION OF FORGIVENESS**

God forgives the sins of all who repent. You are forgiven, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

*The Word*

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Speak into our ears, O Spirit, the holy word of life. Tell us who we are and to whom we belong so that we may live with gratitude for all that you have done. Amen.

SCRIPTURE READINGS

*New Testament Reading: Romans 8:12-17*

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

*New Testament Reading: John 3:1-13*

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

ANTHEM      *The Unclouded Day/ Will the Circle Be Unbroken*      Tom and Katie Stocks, Arlis Wozniak

SERMON      “The Relational God”      Rev. David Ukropina

Today is Trinity Sunday, and as is typical on this Sunday in the church year, our lectionary Bible passages include references to the three persons of the trinity. We see this in our passage from Romans, with its mention of the Spirit bearing witness to our adoption as heirs of God and of Christ. Its also there with the conversation from John’s gospel between Jesus and Nicodemus.

We see this every year with the lectionary passages on Trinity Sunday. The preparers of the lectionary will pick out passages that somehow refer to the three parts of the trinity, of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. In other years, we’ve had the passage from Matthew about baptizing in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and from Luke, we’ve had the passage of the baptism of Jesus, with God speaking, and the Spirit descending like a dove.

And all of these passages taken together display a rich interplay between the three persons of the Trinity. In our passage today from Romans, Paul writes to the church in Rome and tells them of how, through the work of the Holy Spirit, we are made children of God. This is not something that happens by nature, but it is the Spirit that makes us God’s children.

And in John's gospel, we have a lengthy conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus about the work of the Holy Spirit, with Jesus telling us that we must be born from the Spirit, and that no one has ascended into heaven except for the Son of Man. Throughout this passage, we have a description of the divine interaction between the three persons of the Trinity.

But having said all of this, the relationship between the Bible and the Trinity is still one that is hard to define and one that remains elusive and mysterious. Certainly, the Bible touches upon the Trinity, but as we know, the words "The Trinity" never explicitly appear in the Bible, and we do not hear scripture specifically mention the doctrine of the Trinity.

But it's not like the early church simply invented the doctrine of the Trinity. The work of the three persons of the Trinity runs throughout the Bible and through the history of the people of God, from the opening verses of Genesis, all the way through holy scripture, and up until the last verses of the book of Revelation, when the Spirit of God asks Jesus to return.

Scripture often hints at the doctrine of the Trinity, but at the same time, it protects something of the holy mystery of the Trinity. No matter how much we try, there is always something a bit elusive about this doctrine, and we humans can never completely cover or understand it.

I've mentioned before that when I've been asked to teach confirmation in the past, especially in regards to the Trinity, I always take a moment to mention that there are aspects of the Trinity which will always elude our grasp. It is a good thing to talk about and to learn about and to take time to study, but we can never completely comprehend it.

This leaves a challenge to any preacher, especially on Trinity Sunday, of how to speak about what is essentially a baffling mystery. We have the testimony of scripture, and of our own lives, but our words and our thoughts can never articulate fully what we are talking about. As a preacher, there is always the necessity of at least, in part, bowing down before the mystery.

Still, as I've mentioned in other sermons about the Trinity, how we understand it or interpret it, does matter to us, as individuals and as a community. It matters to ask the question, why is this Trinitarian claim so important? Why does it matter to us and to our lives? These are the questions that always greet us on this particular Sunday.

Although Presbyterians are not often accused of being bold and radical, to make the claim that God is in the form of three persons is a bold and radical claim. When we do this, we are claiming that the same God who created the planets and who brought life out of nothing, is also the God who walked this earth as Jesus.

The same God who experienced horrible suffering on our behalf on the cross, is also the God who experienced the death of an only child. The Trinitarian belief claims that the same God who ascended into heaven is also the same God who is always with us, throughout time and across all cultures and places.

When we claim the Trinity, we are claiming that the God who prays for us is also the one who groans within our souls with sighs too deep for words. When we assert the Trinity, we believe that the God who has been active in history is also acting now and will continue to act in the future, to reconcile all things.

In all of this, we claim and know that God has relationship at the very core of who God is. The fact that there is divine community has profound implications for us and for our lives, whether its individually or in the church. The main implication for us is that we are mutually interdependent, and we need each other to be fully human. As Christians, we cannot be autonomous and isolated.

One of the beliefs found in theological history was the idea of Deism, which became somewhat popular in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. If you remember, the deists held that God was a kind of "watchmaker" God, who wound the world up to run on certain principles, and then let it run without being involved in an ongoing manner.

Reformed theology, of which we are a part, rejects this position, most profoundly on the grounds of the providence of God. To say God is uninvolved with the ongoing experiences of humanity would be to reject our understanding of the Trinity and the way that the divine relationship of the Trinity continues to interact in connection with humanity.

If we humans are created in God's image, and God is inherently relational at God's core, then we are inherently called to reflect that reality. In order to be Christ's body, we don't just exist side by side each other, but we live out our identity as adopted children of God by being in relationship with others in our community.

Of course, this involves all personality types, and some people are inevitably more outgoing than others. The nature of the Trinity does not demand all of us to become extroverts, but no matter how our personalities are, we are drawn into relationship and community through the Holy Spirit and the divine community.

Now I've joked before that my definition of dysfunction is "wherever two or more are gathered together." We know from human experience that any time you get people together, there is always going to be arguing and fighting. It doesn't happen constantly, but it just is part of human nature.

However, one of the things that I draw from the nature of the Trinity and its relationality between the three persons, is that we are called and compelled to "hang in there" with each other. Church fights and church conflict have always been a part of our experience and our reality, and probably always will be.

Anyone who has been a part of a church anywhere, and especially people who have been involved in leadership, know that there is always some quarreling and disagreement about opinions. Saying it's always been there is not to make light of it, and I think God often grieves over the divisions within the body of Christ.

But some church conflict is always inevitable. It reminds me of the way the greatest human conflicts often happen within families, because that's what people care about the most. Religious scholars have commented that some of the greatest fights between Muslims, Jews and Christians happen because they are family, all claiming Abraham as an ancestor.

Sociologists have also noticed that the greatest number of murders usually happen within families, because again, that is where passions tend to run the highest. Why get so upset over people you hardly know? It also reminds me of the old line from the song, "You always hurt the one you love."

These realities are direct consequences of our human sin and our falling away from God's perfection. But the Trinity and inter relationality of the three persons remind us and direct us to hang in there with one another, whether it's churches or families, because in doing that, we are working out how to live with and love each other.

Of course, there are limits to this. No one should ever put up with abusive or willfully destructive behavior, whether in a marriage, a family, or a church, and we've all experienced toxic situations that we've needed to get out of. But an understanding of the reality of the relational Trinity helps us to hang in there with others through the gift of mutual forbearance.

In thinking about all of this, I'm reminded somehow of committee meetings, of all things. All churches seem to have committees and committee meetings, but Presbyterians seem to excel at them. And all of us who have served on committees have experienced moments that seem full of tedium and inefficiency, as well as squabbling and conflict.

But at the same time, those who have served together in a group with other Christians have also experienced the amazing feeling and sense that when people work together as Christians, the Spirit of God can be felt. For me, there's something so very Christian about being in a group where God clearly uses the gifts and even personalities of those present to lead the group towards wisdom and purpose.

All of this requires gifts of forgiveness, forbearance and persistence. It requires us to hang in there, whether in churches or in families, but we all have to figure out ways to do this with one another. I think this is the case throughout history, and it is the case in this particular historical moment.

There's no doubt or mystery about this being an incredibly polarized time for our country, both politically and socially, and that affects all of us, whether at church, or gathered around the Thanksgiving dinner table, or being together at other holidays. And these things seem to have been intensified with the pandemic, and all of us going through so much stress recently.

In just one week, we will finally be back worshipping together in person. We appreciate the responses we received in our re-opening survey, but it's clear that people are all over the place in terms of opinions about

re-opening. Most have urged caution in re-opening, but it's a reminder that none of us exists just on our own, and we operate in community.

For Marta and for me, and I hope for you, the return of in-person worship will be something to celebrate, this being back together in person, and it will serve as a reminder of the presence of God when we are back together to worship almighty God, the one who has community at the very heart of God's being. Amen.

#### AFFIRMATION OF FAITH - from The Apostles Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic Church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.

#### *Responding to God's Word*

#### PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE AND THE LORD'S PRAYER

Loving God, we pray that the love which moved between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit may renew our lives and draw us into your life...

We pray for the church, that we may be brought closer to each other and to you...

We pray for the Earth and all its creatures, that the laws we pass may regard our home in God's universe as a precious gift...

We pray for our families and our communities, that you may show us the importance of each other, and strengthen us in your grace and truth...

We pray for the sick and those who suffer; for those who struggle to pay rent or a mortgage; for those who have no home; for those who are abused in our communities; for people who long for family but are alone; for children who do not have good guides to raise them; and for whatever else you see that we need...

Into your hands we entrust all that is of concern this day, sure that you hear our pleas, grateful that you will be done on earth as in heaven. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray...

**Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**

#### *Sending of God's Word*

CLOSING HYMN

*Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise*

#12

BENEDICTION

And now may the Lord watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other.

-Genesis, 31:49