

may have with particular beliefs or practices. . . . From the beginning, what attracted outsiders who walked into a gathering of Christians, as I did on that February morning, was the presence of a group joined by spiritual power into an extended family.”⁷

I believe that people today are not interested in joining a particular church with a particular set of beliefs. But they are deeply interested in finding an extended family that is joined by spiritual power.

Imagine just for a minute. What if there was a spiritual power that, in spite of our own proclivity to mess up, could enable us to discover inner resources that would guide us into a better quality of life, help us deal with disappointment, overcome feelings of inadequacy, relieve daily anxiety, and give a deep sense of purpose and meaning? Would you be interested?

In our text for today, the apostle Paul was being very practical when he talked about God as Trinity. He was not discussing dogmatic theology, but instead, he was wrestling with the very practical question of how to live this life of faith with all of its benefits.

There are two very different forces at work in our lives, Paul said. One is our inherent proclivity to sin. Have you ever wondered why you repeat and reenact old patterns that you know are not helpful? Why do we undermine our own good intentions? What is it in me that continually frustrates my own desires for good? How is it that even though I know better, I continue to do the same things that disappoint myself, my family, my friends, and my God? Everyone in this room knows exactly what I am describing. Paul’s word for this force was “flesh.” He was not talking about our human bodies as the enemy, but an inner life principle over which we have seemingly no control. “Wretched man that I am!” he says. “Who will rescue me from this body of death?”⁸

But Paul says, there is another life force at work. This force he calls Spirit. God’s

Spirit indwells us to guide, empower, motivate, and energize us to discover within ourselves the resources that we need for a full and abundant life. It is not something that can be explained, but it can be experienced.

One of the ways that the apostle Paul thought about this was to imagine an orphan. Not the cute orphan with the big brown eyes that is so adorable that you have to adopt. But imagine the orphan who is rebellious and in spite of your best efforts, refuses to respond to anything that is loving and helpful. Imagine the orphan that is the least attractive. That is the orphan that gets adopted. But slowly something happens that transforms the orphan. Finally, in the innermost resources of their being where we are our truest selves, the orphan is able to say to the adopting parent, “Abba! Father! Daddy!”

We are that unlovely orphan. In spite of our proclivity to sin, God said, “I will adopt you. I want you.” When there wells up inside of us the ability to say to God, “Abba! Father! Daddy!” then we know the meaning of the indwelling Spirit. It is not something that can be explained. But it can be experienced.

Most of us who keep coming here Sunday after Sunday are drawn to this extended family because we have experienced a spiritual power that transformed us. Not one of us here can explain what we mean by Trinity. But we can tell you that God has made a difference and we know this God as Father, Son, and Spirit.

¹ Wm. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, April-June, '06, p. 50.

² W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, cf., “Mystery.”

³ Exodus 33:11b.

⁴ Exodus 33:20-23.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 13:12a.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 8:2a.

⁷ Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, p. 3, 4, 5, 6, 7.

⁸ Romans 7:23.


FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH
Let Us Share First With You.



June 11, 2006
Trinity Sunday

Experiencing God
as Trinity
Romans 8:12-17

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Today is Trinity Sunday in the Christian calendar. William Willimon, the preachers' teacher describes Trinity Sunday as "a tough Sunday for preachers, particularly if we have the notion that our job is to help you understand the Christian faith."¹

The special days in the Christian calendar are intended to teach the faith. The regular rhythm of repetition has a didactic purpose. Worship is designed to help you understand the Christian faith. But Trinity Sunday is unique because it is the only day in the whole calendar that is devoted to a doctrine—the doctrine of God.

We believe that there is only one God. But Christians have a unique understanding of God. Christians believe that God is one, but three; three in one: God the Father; God the Son; God the Holy Spirit; a tri-unity; Trinity.

This is the one day in the Christian year that reminds us that regardless how much we think we know or understand, God is always just beyond our ability to know, explain, or comprehend. Let me give an example.

Nicodemus came to interview Jesus one night. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin. In order to understand Nicodemus, think of the best Sunday school teacher that you have ever known; think of the best biblical scholar that you have ever known; think of the person that you would most want to pray for you. When you have that person in mind, you have a composite picture of Nicodemus. He was smart, committed, and deeply spiritual. I believe that he came to interview Jesus because he had a sincere desire to know God.

I do not believe that Jesus was trying to obfuscate, or confuse, or be unclear. But the more he talked about God, the more befuddled Nicodemus became until he finally exclaimed, "How can these things be?" A good paraphrase might be, "What in the world are you talking about?"

This inability to know is what the Bible calls mystery. In his Expository Dictionary of

New Testament Words, W. E. Vine says, "In the ordinary sense a mystery implies knowledge withheld."² In other words, mystery is that which we can't know. It is beyond knowing.

The Bible has a lot of ways of talking about God as mystery. Moses was as intimate with God as anyone can ever be. The Bible says that he talked to God "as one speaks to a friend."³ One day, he asked to be privileged to see God. God answered, "You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live. . . . See there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take my hand away, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."⁴ The very best that Moses was allowed was a glimpse of God's backside.

The apostle Paul had a similar insight. Paul said that at our very best, insight into God is little more than a dim reflection in a mirror.⁵ I think that is the reason why Paul so strongly urged against assuming that we know. He wrote, "Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge."⁶ What is necessary is the knowledge that you don't know.

When we talk about God as Trinity, we are back at a place of mystery. How can we understand that which is three and one at the same time? Every effort to describe the Trinity only leads to confusion. So what is the point of Trinity Sunday? Though we can't explain God as Trinity, we do experience God as Trinity. That is what I want us to reflect on today.

I believe that most people today have little patience for dogmatic theology. But there is a deep hunger for an experience of God that can make a practical difference in our lives.

Elaine Pagels is a church historian. In her book, Beyond Belief, she tells about her family crisis that brought her back to church after many years. "On a bright Sunday morning in February, shivering in a T-shirt and running shorts, I stepped into the vaulted

stone vestibule of the Church of the Heavenly Rest in New York to catch my breath and warm up. Since I had not been in church for a long time, I was startled by my response to the worship in progress—the soaring harmonies of the choir singing with the congregation; and the priest, a woman in bright gold and white vestments, proclaiming the prayers in a clear, resonant voice. As I stood watching, a thought came to me: Here is a family that knows how to face death.

"That morning I had gone for an early morning run while my husband and two-and-a-half-year-old son were still sleeping. The previous night I had been sleepless with fear and worry. Two days before, a team of doctors at Babies Hospital, Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center, had performed a routine checkup on our son, Mark, a year and six months after his successful open-heart surgery. The physicians were shocked to find evidence of a rare lung disease. Disbelieving the results, they tested further for six hours before they finally called us in to say that Mark had pulmonary hypertension, an invariably fatal disease, they told us. 'How much time?' I asked. 'We don't know; a few months, a few years' . . . Standing in the back of the church, I recognized, uncomfortably, that I needed to be there. . .

"When people would say to me, 'Your faith must be of great help to you,' I would wonder: What do they mean? What is faith? Certainly not simple assent to the set of beliefs that worshipers in that church recited every week ('We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.') . . . Yet I know from my own encounters with people in that church. . . believers, agnostics, and seekers—as well as people who don't belong to any church—that what matters in religious experience involves much more than what we believe (or do not believe). What is Christianity and what is religion, I wondered, and why do so many of us still find it compelling, whether or not we belong to a church, and despite difficulties we