

Blessed Trinity

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First Christian Church, Hamilton, Illinois — May 22, 2016 (Trinity)

Isaiah 40:13-14, 21-31 ESV



Who has measured the Spirit of the LORD, or what man shows him his counsel? Whom did he consult, and who made him understand? Who taught him the path of justice, and taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding? . . .

Do you not know? Do you not hear? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in; who brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness. Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows on them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble.

To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high and see: who created these? He who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name, by the greatness of his might, and because he is strong in power not one is missing.

Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God"? Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.

Ephesians 4:1-16 ESV

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

There is one body and one Spirit — just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call — one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men." (In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)

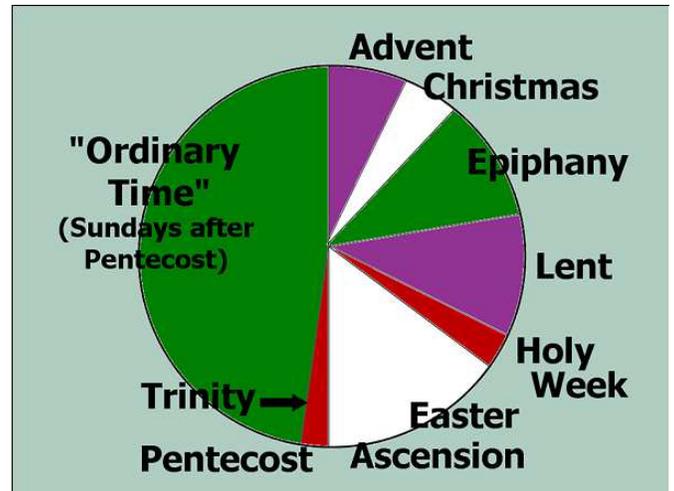
And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

You'll recall that last week I asked you to wear red to church because it was Pentecost, which celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples. Pentecost is sometimes called the "birthday of the church," because it's the day the apostles first proclaimed Jesus risen from the dead and therefore vindicated as the Messiah of Israel, or Christ. It all began on that day in Jerusalem, and it was the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples that worked their transformation into *apostles*, messengers and preachers of the Messiah. Therefore many of us wore red last week, symbolizing the flames, the "tongues of fire," that fell upon the apostles at Pentecost.

But you'll notice the color this week has changed to green, because with the season of Pentecost we've switched over to what students of the church year call "ordinary time." (By the way, a copy of this chart is on

the bulletin board in the hallway.) During the first half of the church year, we observe special events relating to the life and ministry of Jesus: his birth, his baptism, his teaching of the kingdom of God, his transfiguration, his mighty works of healing, his suffering and death, his resurrection, his ascension to the right hand of the Father, and the sending of his Holy Spirit at Pentecost. But now we take a turn into post-Pentecost time, when the church takes over the mission and begins to do the “greater works” Jesus told us we would be doing in his name. So the green color will stay with us until the first Sunday of Advent, which this year will be the 27th of November.

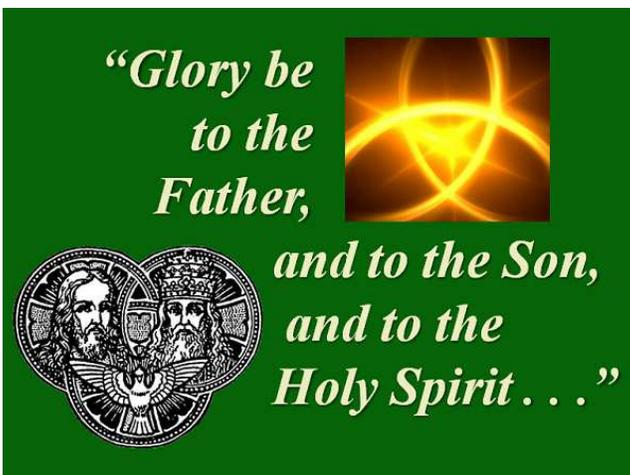
There is, however, one special day that marks the beginning of “ordinary time,” and that’s today, known as Trinity Sunday, when we pay special attention to the doctrine of the Holy Trinity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. So we began our worship with the hymn “Praise Ye the Triune God.” Here at First Christian Church we recognize the importance of the doctrine of the Trinity. Article B of our Statement of Faith reads, “We



believe that there is one God, eternally existent in three persons: God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit.” As we gather each week we always conclude our responsive psalm with the *Gloria Patri*: “Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost.” The Doxology we sing as we present our offerings to God is another expression of our belief in the Trinity: “Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.” When we use these expressions we’re offering praise to God in his fulness. Today I want to look into some of the implications of the doctrine of the Trinity for our life as followers of Jesus.

First of all, let’s be clear that when we name the three “persons” of the Trinity we’re not saying we believe in three gods — as some people, like Muslims, mistakenly think we believe. Scripture is clear, both Old and New Testaments, that God is One. So the doctrine of the Trinity is not an inventory of the warehouse of divinities, as if there could be three separate gods or even three “departments” of one god.

Any time the Scriptures refer to the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit the understanding is that the fulness of the divine being is involved in each “person,” as we say. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 8:5-6:



For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth — as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords” — yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

It’s pretty clear that, for Paul, whatever the Son does is also what the Father does — just as Jesus himself stated, “The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (John 14:10-11).” And it’s also clear that Paul didn’t make a clean distinction between the Son, or the Lord, and the Spirit; for in 2 Corinthians 3:16-18 he states,

But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

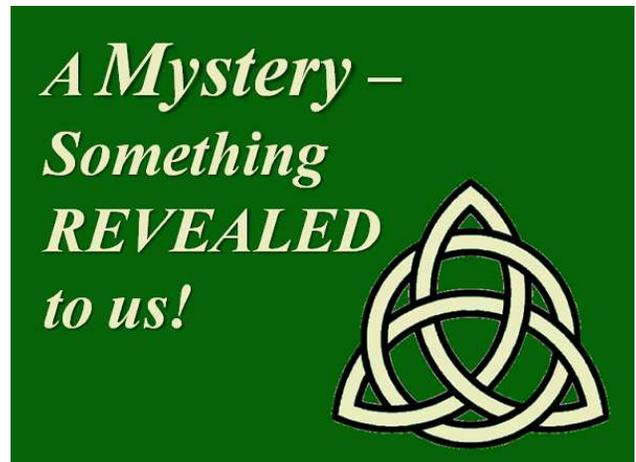
So when we speak of the Holy Trinity as “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” that doesn’t mean we can slice God into parts. Each of the “persons,” or faces, of God — each way we experience his presence and power — brings the full force of his being.

Paul, in that passage, refers to removing the veil — the veil that tries to keep God off people’s radar screen and tries to prevent them from seeing God at work in their world. Sometimes people express this veiled

Presence by saying that the Trinity is a “mystery,” and by this they mean it’s kind of spooky thing we can never really understand. But that isn’t what the Bible authors mean by “mystery.” They don’t mean something we can’t ever figure out. What they mean by “mystery” is brought out by what Paul says at the very end of his Letter to the Romans:

Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith — to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen (Romans 16:25-27).

A “mystery,” in the Bible, isn’t something kept hidden so we can’t understand it. Indeed, a “mystery” is something that’s been *revealed* or *disclosed*. Maybe people couldn’t understand it before, but now with the revelation of Messiah Jesus we finally see the truth. So the Trinity isn’t an incomprehensible idea that we just have to accept without trying to understand it. It’s the *revealed truth* about God and how he comes to us. Isaiah asked, “Who has measured the Spirit of the LORD, or what man shows him his counsel? . . . Do you not know? Do you not hear? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?” (Isaiah 40:13, 21). The things of God don’t have to be incomprehensible and mysterious to us — at least the things that deal with his benefits to us, and our responsibilities to him. There’s no “mystery” about those things, because the Lord has made them plain enough through his Word.



There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.

-- Ephesians 4:4-6

Hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us. You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.

-- Romans 5:5-6

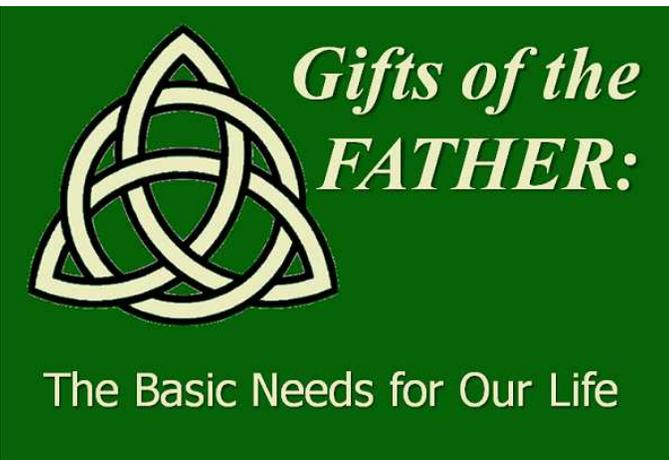
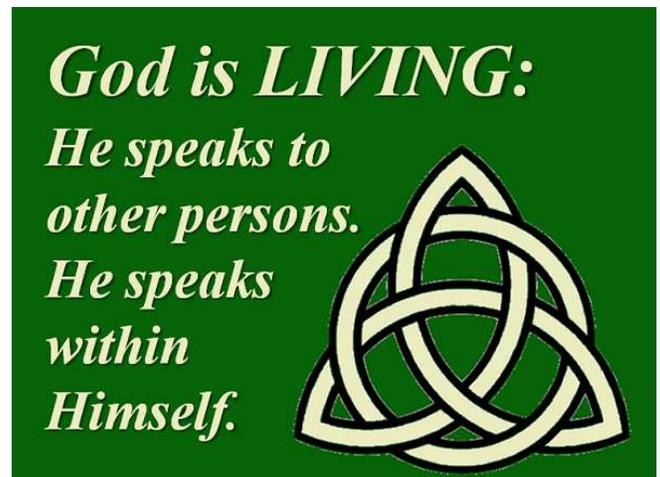
working: “Hope does not disappoint us,” he says, “because *God* has poured out his love into our hearts by the *Holy Spirit*, whom he has given us. You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, *Christ* died for the ungodly” (Romans 5:5-6). And he offers this familiar benediction at the end of 2 Corinthians: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Corinthians 13:14). The idea of the Holy Trinity pervades the writings of the New Testament, even if the precise formula isn’t there.

So let’s look at some of the benefits we receive, as followers of Jesus, from our faithfulness to the doctrine of the Trinity. First of all, this “mystery” helps us understand that *God is alive* — alive within himself, and alive in communicating with us. That’s where the word “person” becomes helpful, when we speak of “God in three persons, blessed Trinity.” A “person” is a face, a speaker in communication with other speakers. And, throughout Scripture, the Lord is always interacting and communicating with other speakers, creating a relationship with them. That’s the way God sees himself, the Bible is telling us: as a Person who speaks and relates to other persons. Nothing’s more frustrating, in trying to deal with someone about an issue, than

having that person refuse to speak to you. The three Persons of the Trinity speak to us, so we become aware of the life of God.

But that's not all. The Trinity tells us *God speaks within his own being*, as Father, Son, and Spirit communicate with one another. That's why the Bible so often calls him the "living God," because life requires movement within as well as without. If there's no movement *within* your body, then you're dead, and that applies to your spirit as well; if you're not able to carry on a conversation with yourself — to look at yourself and gauge your own thoughts and actions — then there's not much life in your spirit.

The Trinity reminds us that God is like that; he carries on a communication within himself, and that means he's alive. We see that in the very first chapter of the Bible, when God says to himself, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Genesis 1:26). If God could not speak within himself, he could never come to the decision to create this immense universe and all that fills it, including you and me. But he has done so, and therefore we know he's the living God. And *we have been made like him*; we're a "trinity" of our own, because we can talk to ourselves and make decisions and take action. The doctrine of the Trinity helps us understand not only this truth about God, but also this truth about ourselves and what it means for us to be alive.



Secondly, when we understand God in terms of the Trinity we understand his generosity to us: the gifts he gives to us. The Scripture speaks of gifts of the Father, gifts of the Son, and gifts of the Spirit. Yes, we could say that all these gifts come from God in his fulness, but the New Testament doesn't speak of them that way. Instead, it speaks more specifically.

James reminds us, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures" (James 1:16-17). We've been given life itself by the Father, who made us in the image of the Creator.

Jesus assures us that the Father cares for us and provides for our needs: "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" (Matthew 7:11). The *basic things our lives depend on* are evidence of the gifts of the Father.

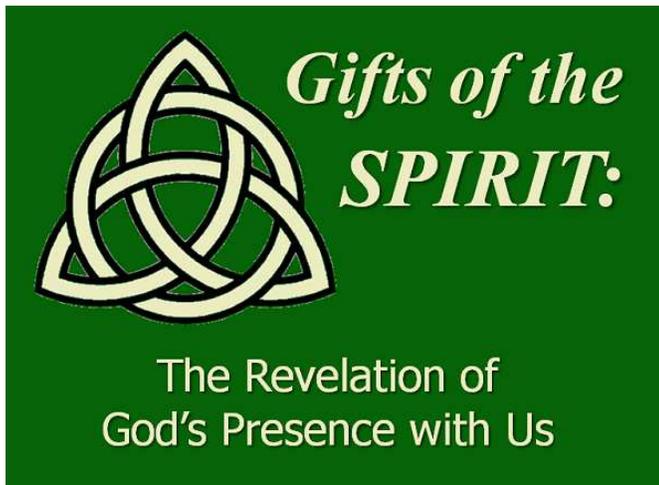
The gifts of the Son are more specialized, we might say; Paul lists these gifts in Ephesians 4, where he enumerates what we call the "ministry gifts" of the ascended Messiah: "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-12). The gifts of the Son are *people* — people who lead the church into higher levels of Christian maturity. Apostles, or missionaries, spread the word of the kingdom of God. Prophets bring encouragement and the assurance that the Lord is present with us. Evangelists present the gospel and lead people toward submitting to the Lordship of Jesus. Finally, Paul lists shepherds, or pastors, and teachers; those are the leaders who care for the flock of God, training them



in discipleship and understanding of the Scriptures. These gifts of the Son, ascended to the right hand of the Father, build up the body of Christ.

Paul spells this out differently in Romans 12, where he mentions the ways in which various members of the body contribute to the building up of the body:

For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness" (Romans 12:4-8).



You may have a gift for teaching, or a gift for encouraging your Christian friends, or a gift for helping others, or a gift for serving the needs of the congregation, or a gift for leading or steering the affairs of the church — and even a gift for giving, providing generously for the work of the church. And, obviously, you may exercise several of these gifts together. The ministry gifts are the gifts of the Son.

Then we come to the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which the apostle Paul lists with special emphasis in 1 Corinthians 12:

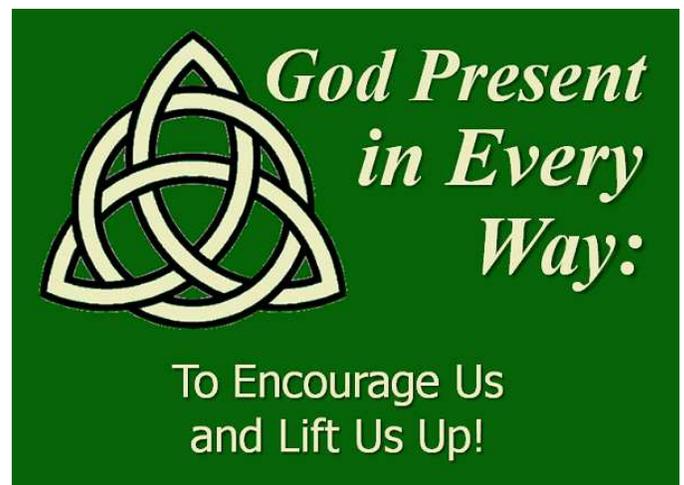
Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the

manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills (1 Corinthians 12:4-11).

These gifts of the Spirit operate to manifest the life of God in our midst, so the visitor may exclaim, "Surely God is among you!" When these gifts operate, people are healed, delivered from oppressive conditions, set on the right path of life, and freed up to give God the praise due to him. When these gifts of the Spirit operate in the church, people come to know the reality of God in their life.

I was going to say that we need to pray for the release of these gifts in our lives, but that's wrong. If we have Jesus, we have the Holy Spirit; and if we have the Holy Spirit, we already have his gifts. So we don't need to ask God to release them in us; you and I just need to manifest them. We don't need to pray for something God has already given us; we need to exercise our faith and do *what he's given us the power to do!* For example, take the gifts of healing. God has already healed us in the suffering of Jesus; Scripture says, "By his stripes you have been healed." God isn't going to do anything more in response to our prayers for healing than he's already done. It's up to us to release that gift in ourselves and in the life of our congregation.

All the gifts come to us from God in his fullness, whether we call them gifts of the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit. Because of the Trinity, we understand how God is the living God who imparts his life to us, and we understand how he bestows upon us his gifts that empower us to do the work to which he has called us. Finally, the Trinity reminds us that *we can't hide from God*. Proverbs 20:27 says, "The spirit of man is the lamp of the LORD, searching all his innermost parts." Because God the Son has come to us as a human being, the Word of God made flesh, God understands us and knows what



we deal with in life. As 1 John 4:17 says, "By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because *as he is so also are we in this world.*" The doctrine of the Trinity is an encouragement to us, because it reminds us how God is present in every way to encourage us and lift us up. To return to those words of Isaiah:

He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.



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