The Trinity
John 16:12-15
Trinity Sunday, Year C June 15, 2025
Choptank Charge Pastor Nan Duerling

Good morning, friends, and Happy Father's Day to those who are dads and those whose love and care has enabled them to be like a dad to someone. I hope you were uplifted by our Pentecost service at Antioch last Saturday. Special thanks to Dave Benjamin, Hannah LeCompte, Ann Robinson, and Bob Sellers for leading us. Everyone enjoyed the delightful covered dish dinner. Wouldn't it be great if we could do this more often!

Moving on, this is Trinity Sunday, which on the calendar of the Revised Common Lectionary always follows Pentecost. So, today we are entering the season after Pentecost. If you've looked at the insert in your worship packet last week, you likely noticed that, beginning next week, we will be exploring the Gospel of Luke through August. Actually, our journey through Luke continues through Christ the King Sunday, which is the week before Advent. I must confess that I love Luke because of the way he tells the story of Jesus, and more importantly, for his concern for the least, the last, and the lost. Moreover, Luke includes 24 parables, which is more than any of the other Gospels. And 18 of the 24 are only found in Luke. We'll be delving into several of these along the way.

Today, though, we will investigate just four verses from the Gospel of John. Recall that the theology of the Trinity was not agreed upon until the First Council of Nicaea in AD 325. This council, convened by Roman Emperor Constantine, aimed to settle disputes surrounding the nature of Christ and the Holy Spirit. The Trinity is a foundational Christian doctrine that affirms the belief in one God existing as three co-equal and co-eternal persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These three are distinct but share the same divine nature. Today's reading from John mentions all of the three persons, though without a theology that ties them together.

Without trying to unravel a lengthy debate to show how we got to some agreement on the theology of the Trinity, let's concentrate on how these three persons communicate with themselves and with us. Some people refer to this as a relationship among dancers.

We open in John 16:12 with what seems to be a puzzling verse. The disciples are sitting with Jesus in the Upper Room, listening to his final discourse before his crucifixion. They are well aware that their beloved leader, teacher, and friend will soon be leaving them. Their heads are likely spinning, and their hearts are surely heavy. How is it, then, that Jesus can tell them he has more to say, but that they cannot bear that now? Jesus is about to die! What can be too much for his followers to handle at this moment? Moreover, this is not new business. During his farewell, Jesus has already explained four times how his departure will benefit them and allow the Paraclete (Holy Spirit) to come into their midst (John 14:15-17, 14:26, 15:26, 16:7-11). Today's verses from John 16 mark the fifth time that Jesus has tried to explain the benefits of his departure. On an intellectual level, I'm sure Jesus' reasoning is sound. However, I'm with the disciples. How do you just say goodbye to someone who has meant so much to you, even if they are offering you a substitute? I imagine we've all had a similar experience. Either because of her departure, or ours, a favorite teacher is no longer with us. As United Methodists, we know well how difficult it can be to say goodbye to a beloved pastor. I

remember two particularly painful goodbyes. Craig and I had bonded with these pastors during their tenure at our church, and we remained close friends for years. That different relationship—first pastor and then friend—was good, but Craig and I still missed seeing these two on Sundays and often during the week.

What could Jesus possibly be offering to his disciples—and to us—when he tries to explain that it is better for him to go away so that the Paraclete can come? Had I been one of his disciples, I definitely would have preferred someone I knew and could touch over some shadowy figure I knew nothing about. In all fairness, Jesus did try to explain that the Spirit, the Paraclete, would protect the disciples and guide them "into all truth" (16:13). He would not be offering new teachings, but rather, would help the disciples recall and more deeply understand what Jesus had already taught them. Perhaps meant to be the most comforting of all is that the Spirit will always be with them, unlike Jesus, who is returning to the Father. They will not be alone, though. Jesus makes clear that "all that the Father has is [his]" (16:15).

In a book of devotions (*Mornings with Bonhoeffer: 100 Reflections on the Christian Life, pages 69-70*), Dr. Donald Mc Kim writes:

> Bonhoeffer expanded on Paul's insight ["It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" in Galatians 2:20] when he stressed that the Christ, who enters our life, is the one who was "incarnate, crucified, and transfigured." This is the Jesus we know from the Gospels. Jesus is the eternal Son of God who with the Holy Spirit and God the Father are the triune God we worship and adore: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
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> By the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ dwells in me, as does God the Father. In a breathtaking sentence, Bonhoeffer says that "*it is indeed the holy Trinity who dwells within Christians*" (Italics added). The eternal Trinity lives in us! The triune God "permeates" us and is with us in every dimension of who we are. The triune God "changes" us... "into the very image of the triune God." Imagine that!
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> How important and exciting it is to realize that with our every breath, the Holy Trinity is with us, working to enable us to live in the "image of the triune God"!

I often think about God's words in Genesis 1:26: "Let us make humankind in our image." To be honest, I've always thought of God making you and me in the image of God the Father. I have never been too clear on who the "us" is supposed to be, since the Jewish Scriptures had no understanding of "God in three persons." For the Jews, God is described as being "one" (Deuteronomy 6:4). For them, there is no such thing as one God being comprised of three persons. And yet, from a Christian perspective, for humans to be created in the image of the triune God makes perfect sense. As Bonhoeffer has written, "it is indeed the holy Trinity who dwells within Christians." This is the image of the triune God that we all bear.

If my understanding is correct, then it is relatively easy to accept Bonhoeffer's point that the Trinity dwells within each of us. And, assuming this is true, we can also understand the intimate communication that we can have with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Today's bulletin cover, an icon of the Holy Trinity by Russian Andrei Rublev, shows the three in close communication. And notice, there is room at the table for you as well!

Jesus taught his disciples quite a bit. Much of his teaching is recorded in the New Testament, particularly the Gospels, but as we are reminded in the Gospel of John, there is more that was not recorded (John 20:30). The Spirit, however, can guide us into all truth and

can “fill in the blanks” so to speak. We can learn more about Jesus if we will open ourselves to the words of the Holy Spirit.

This concept of “more to learn,” because Jesus’ followers couldn’t take on board all that he wanted us to know when he walked the earth, raises important issues for his body, the church, and for how we go about interpreting the Bible. Do we see the book as having come to us on stone? Are the words written there so fixed that they can never be subject to interpretation? Two examples will show us that over the centuries people have learned to read the Bible in ways that are not literal. First, in the New Testament, we are told that slaves should obey their masters. Some of this kind of language was used to defend the practice of chattel slavery as the United States ramped up to the Civil War. Slavery, often due to debt, was part and parcel of first century life in Jesus’ world. Paul did not argue with the idea of slavery, but he did write to his friend Philemon, appealing to him to release his slave Onesimus, a brother in Christ. A second example concerns the role of women in the church. Women had been (and in some denominations, still are) shut out of leadership roles. In our own Methodist tradition, it was not until the General Conference of 1956 that women could be ordained with full clergy rights. This means that women are eligible to serve as deacons, elders, and bishops, and can hold all other leadership positions within the church.

In both of these examples, it’s easy to recognize that change in interpreting the Bible brought about new understandings and new life to the church, as well as to individuals within it. Clearly, the Holy Spirit was at work in us collectively, pointing the way to a broader understanding of Jesus’ teachings. We may question whether such changes are warranted or not, given the texts we know as the Bible. It’s important to note that those who are powerful—in this case the men—control who gets to do what. But that doesn’t erase the fact that a band of women followed Jesus and supported him financially, or that women like Lydia hosted house churches, or that Priscilla co-pastored with her husband Aquilla, or that Philip had four daughters who had the gift of prophecy (Acts 21:9). My point here is that some people and their gifts have been hidden from view and suppressed in “official channels,” but that doesn’t mean that God would have it to be so. How can I make such a bold claim? If all humanity—regardless of gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, educational level, geographic location, or any other marker we choose to hold up—is created in the divine image and infused with the Trinity, then we are all gifted and able to work as God leads us.

So, where does that leave us on this Trinity Sunday? Let me suggest that we can encourage each other to identify and use our God-given gifts. The Holy Spirit will, without doubt, lead us into all truth and to any ministries where we are called. I hope that some of you who may not have considered yourselves called and equipped before are going to recognize the work that God has for you to do and impel you forward to do it. I don’t want to sound glib about the effort and the trust in God it will take to answer such a call. Believe me, in July 2019 when I said yes to Bishop Peggy and District Superintendent Davis, I expected to be here for a few months. But, here I am in 2025. I’m honestly not sure how much longer I will be with you. But I do know that whoever follows me, and whenever that happens, your next pastor will need and appreciate your enthusiasm about answering God’s call and stepping forward to assist in the ministry here.

Is the prospect of such a huge responsibility for which you were not formally educated daunting for you? I can say in no uncertain terms that it was for me. Despite my years as a

curriculum writer and editor for the United Methodist Publishing House, as well as a volunteer leader at our local, district, conference, and even General Church levels, I felt very unprepared. Not to worry. I figured I could get by for a few months. But God had other plans, at least for the past six years.

I don't know what the future holds, but I do know who holds the future. I also know that the God within me is always leading and directing me. Problem is, I'm, not always listening. Our Office Manager at Zion has a wonderful tagline on her emails, which I've been working to take to heart. It reads: *Worry is a conversation you have with yourself about things you cannot change. Prayer is a conversation you have with God about things He can change.* Much as I may hate to admit it, no matter how much I may think I have been talking with God, I need to have fewer conversations with myself and more prayer time with the Holy One in Three!

And the thing about it is that God has made the divine hotline so easy to tap into. It's a local number, because God dwells within me, ready to remind me of what Jesus taught, lead me in the path I am to go, heal me, and pick me up and comfort me when I fall.

So what about you? What about us as three churches working together? I'm a firm believer in Philippians 4:13: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." That's true! I've experienced such an outcome throughout my life. But I have to be listening for that voice within. No, listening to the voice does not guarantee that you won't lose your job, or be ill, or have a falling out with someone dear to you, or have an accident, or anything else you can think of. But constant awareness of the God who dwells in you—who dwells in us—will bring peace that passes all understanding, no matter what the circumstances. I pray that God will show each of you the way, encourage you to step out in faith as you called, and allow you to experience his peace as you follow. The Triune God is alive and well in each one of us!

Love, Nan