

The Trinity, Baptism, and Moving Beyond Fear

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
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Romans 8:12-17

Today is known as Trinity Sunday on the Christian calendar, and as such, the assigned lectionary readings for the day were all chosen around that doctrine (or maybe we should call it a mystery). I think this was an effort by those who put the lectionary together to try to get preachers to try to speak to the idea of the Trinity, at least once a year anyway. Even though the notion of God as Triune is never explicitly mentioned in the New Testament, there are a number of texts in both the New and the Old Testament that became important building blocks for the development of the idea. The text I'm about to read from the Apostle Paul's letter to the church at Rome is one of those texts. Listen for mention of the three persons—the Father, the Son (or Christ), and the Holy Spirit. Notice that the text speaks to fear and pay attention for how Paul uses relational language in referring to God.

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.

We live in a fearful, anxious, and polarized time. Am I telling you something you don't already know?

I don't think there is a person in this sanctuary who would, down deep, disagree with that statement. Now to be clear, I think every period of our nation's history and the larger world's history, has had its share of fear and division. That's part of what it means to be a human in human society. Some of those times have been worse than others, of course, but there have always and ever been things to fear.

In the present our fears involve things like geopolitical conflicts with North Korea, Iran, Russia; tension in the Middle East; the ecological and human costs of a changing climate; increasing gun and gang violence in schools and the rest of society; and so many terrorizing acts from extremists of all stripes, including plenty of angry young white men in addition to people of other hues.

Add to those fears our more personal and private ones. How will I manage without my spouse? What will happen to our economy and how will it affect my financial status? Is my job safe? Will I fit in with my new community? What is the doctor going to tell me about that lump I found? How am I going to make it with my vision impaired? And what about my children and my concerns about their health and well-being? What about what's going to happen with my aging parents?

Have I named a few fears that you have by now? I've certainly identified a few of my own.

When the Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Rome, he was addressing a group of people who had experienced fear, too. They *were* experiencing it. They knew what it was to be imprisoned and

threatened with execution for standing up for what they believed. They lived under the domination of an Empire that was not kind to those who did not fall in line with its dictates. Death and disease were closer at hand to them on a regular basis than they are to us. There was plenty for them to be afraid of, too. But for them and for us, the life of faith—the life of following Jesus—is about somehow moving into and beyond our fears.

To those fearful people and to us, Paul writes a reminder: *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.*

Notice, Paul doesn't tell them "You have nothing to be afraid of." He tells them instead, *do not fall back into fear*. Don't let fear keep you from moving forward and doing what you need to do in the name of God's love, justice, and mercy. You have received a spirit of adoption, Paul tells the Romans. You belong to God. So don't fall back into fear.

Katie and I and about 1500 of our colleagues from across the United States and Canada heard so many wonderful speakers at the Festival of Homiletics this past week. One of the themes many of the speakers took up was boldness. Another theme some of them addressed was the polarization in our country today and how it is stoked and solidified by fear. Fear of the other. Fear of vulnerability. Fear of what is unfolding. Fear.

Of all the many insights and inspirations I received this week, I think my favorite came from Craig Barnes, who is the president of Princeton Seminary and used to be pastor of National Presbyterian Church. In his lecture, he reminded us that people cannot be argued out of their fears. "Try as you might, you will never succeed in arguing people out of their fears," he told us. And to illustrate, he asked us to consider what loving parents would do if a young child of theirs woke up in the middle of the night screaming that a monster was under their bed.

You wouldn't go into their room and tell the child, "Now listen. We've talked about this, Will. You're being totally irrational now. Everyone knows that monsters don't exist. Go back to bed." No, instead, when your child is anxious and afraid, what you do is that you hug her and tell her you love her and that you'll be there with her. You hold him and assure him that you are there. Maybe you even stay in the room with him, or let her come join you and your spouse in bed. That is what helps to quell the fear and enable the child to get back to sleep—knowing that they are loved.

Which leads me to the notion of the Trinity. Over the years, I've taken various tacks in Trinity Sunday sermons and offline conversations with people to try to help explain the triune nature of God and why we bother with trying to affirm that. In some cases, I must just as well have said that it is a riddle hidden inside a mystery wrapped in an enigma. And I suppose that's true, although it doesn't explain much.

In most cases, I've tended to focus more on explaining the three persons and their roles than on the idea that they are all related and ever in relationship: Parent, Child, the love that binds them together. A divine community, a sacred dance into which we, too, are invited.

Father Richard Rohrⁱ, in his book on the Trinity, *The Divine Dance—the Trinity and your Transformation*, writes about a famous Russian Orthodox Icon, created by the iconographer Andrei Rublevⁱⁱ in the 15th century. Perhaps you know the icon. It's one of my favorites. In the icon, entitled *The Hospitality of Abraham*—but also known as *The Trinity*—there are three figures, representing the three visitors who came to Abraham and were welcomed and fed by the patriarch before they

told him the news that his wife Sarah was pregnant and was going to bear a son. Like all good iconography, Rohr says, *it intends to point beyond itself and invites its viewers to a sense of both the beyond and the communion that exists in our midst.*

The three figures in the icon represent different facets of the Holy One, and they are depicted gathered around a table in three different color robes. Gold, blue, and green. The one dressed in gold represents the Father, perfection, fullness, wholeness, the ultimate source. The one dressed in blue represents the Son, or the Human One, the color of sea and sky mirroring each other, God in Christ taking on humanity. And the one dressed in green represents the Spirit—the green symbolizing fertility and divine aliveness that helps things blossom and bloom.

The three look at each other with reverence, they share from a common bowl, and the Spirit's hand points towards an open and fourth place at the table. What Rohr says about this is that as you look at the table, there appears to be a little rectangular hole painted there. Art historians say that sticky residue on the painting suggests that there might have been a mirror glued there. In other words, they hint that Rublev intended for his icon to symbolize that the viewer is invited into the divine community of love that is at the heart of the Triune God.

That may not resolve the mystery of the Trinity for you or me. But what it suggests, if you hold it lightly, is that in the Trinity we are invited into love's embrace and become part of love's expression. As Augustine said, "Wherever there is love, there is a trinity: a lover, a beloved, and a fountain of love."

Earlier in this service we baptized little Emily Jane Wanczyk. She did better than we imagined she would do! We baptized her, as we baptize every infant, child, or adult, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We welcomed her into the Divine Community of Love—a love that cares for and reaches out to everyone no exceptions. She's going to need to be reminded of that over the years, because life can get scary and we need all the people we can get to be committed to the work of love. She needs to know always that she has a place at the table, but hopefully everyone who sees her will see that they have a place at the table, too. The poor ones and the rich, the insiders and the outsiders, the immigrant, the imprisoned, the unjustly treated, the people who always seem to get the short end of the stick, all of us are invited—and adopted into—the divine love. That's part of what it means to worship a triune God.

I wonder, as we consider what it means to be adopted—the fact that we are adopted into this Triune Love—if we might remember that other people are adopted into it as well? We are all children of God.

What would it be like if we really imagined that? What if we imagined ourselves into the shoes of various different people in the world? What if I imagined what it was like to be a child, ripped from the arms of my mother? Or a parent who had my child taken from me? What if I imagined what it was like to be a soldier on the front lines? Or a police officer on the beat? What if I imagined what it was like to grow up in the inner city? What if I imagined what it is like to be scared to death that someone was going to take something from me that I felt like I deserved? What if I imagined what it would be like to be in Aleppoⁱⁱⁱ? What if I really put myself in the skin of people who live day to day in that place? I might really enter into the mystery of the Divine Love then. It might influence how I live and act in my daily life.

Catherine LaCugna^{iv}, whose writing on the Trinity inspired Richard Rohr, ends her book on the Trinity by saying, *“The very nature of God, therefore, is to seek out the deepest possible communion and friendship with every last creature on this earth.”*

Did you hear what she said there? *“The very nature of God, therefore, is to seek out the deepest possible communion and friendship with every last creature on this earth.”*

Rohr says, *“You know what that is? That’s the job description of God. That’s what it’s all about. And the only thing that can keep you out of this divine dance is fear and doubt, or any self-hatred. What would happen in your life—right now—if you accepted what God has created and even allowed?”*

“Suddenly, this is a very safe universe. You have nothing to be afraid of. God is for you. God is leaping toward you! God is on your side, honestly more than you are on your own.”^v

What if we imagined that?

In Jesus’ name. Amen.

ⁱ Richard Rohr OFM is an American author, spiritual writer, and Franciscan friar based in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He was ordained to the priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church in 1970

ⁱⁱ [Andrei Rublev's Icon of the Holy Trinity - Russian Orthodox Church](http://www.holy-transfiguration.org/library_en/lord_trinity_rublev.html)
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ⁱⁱⁱ Aleppo is a city in Syria, serving as the capital of the Aleppo Governorate, the most populous Syrian governorate.

^{iv} Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and the Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993), p. 411. Catherine Mowry LaCugna was a feminist Catholic theologian and author of *God For Us*. LaCugna's passion was to make the doctrine of the Trinity relevant to the everyday life of modern Christians.

^v Richard Rohr, with Mike Morrell, *he Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 2016), p. 194.