

God's Invitation to Learn: The Trinity
Isaiah 55:6-11; Ephesians 4:1-7
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Isaiah 55:6-11 New Revised Standard Version

⁶ Seek the LORD while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;
⁷ let the wicked forsake their way,
and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.
⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.
⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.
¹⁰ For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
¹¹ so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Ephesians 4:1-7 New Revised Standard Version

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort 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 of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift.

It's 1994. Seinfeld and ER are the top shows on TV and Forest Gump is on top of the box office.

The Pew Research Center starts studying political polarization and finds that the two political parties are like bell curves, with a lot of overlap between them. The "average" Republican is not much different from the "average" democrat in terms of where they stand on the political spectrum.

Ten years later in 2004 they are at the same place, but by 2011, they were much further apart; and by 2017, the two parties are approximately four times further apart than they were in 1994.

When Pew looked at people who are politically engaged, one political party—and I'm not going to tell you which!—stopped being a bell curve—the slope just went up—more and more people were further and further to the extremes. And the other party wasn't much better.

This polarization hits us in all sorts of ways—maybe it's just far enough after the holidays that you've put the big fight you got in with your in-law's out of your mind! Sorry to bring it up again. The Adult Faith Formation team has actually started to look together at how we as a church can get better at the skills needed to be ambassadors of reconciliation in these polarized times.

But it's not easy! At one recent workshop on the topic, we realized that one of the topics about which we are polarized is how we move forward to help us become less polarized!

The distinctions we make between ourselves can so easily overwhelm our unity.

That's why it's so important for us to think about the Trinity.

Yep, the Trinity. You heard me right. Thinking about how God is both three and one can help us with issues of polarization in our society and in our lives. And it all comes down to distinction and unity.

But before we get back to polarization, three quick things to remember about the Trinity—God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, Three-in-One, One-in-Three:

- The first is that we are never ever going to understand the mystery of the Trinity fully. As our passage in Isaiah says, “God’s ways are higher than our ways...God’s thoughts are higher than our thoughts.” I don’t think that’s ever more true than talking about the Trinity! But just because we can’t fully understand the Trinity doesn’t mean we can’t understand it better. After all, we celebrated Valentine’s Day last week and I would guess that most of you in a relationship would say that you’ll never fully understand your partner but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t keep trying!
- One of the best short descriptions of the Trinity comes from Shirley Guthrie, whose book we’ll be using for a Lenten group on Christian theology. You may want to write this down. Guthrie says, “One God in Three Persons means one personal God who lives and works in three different ways at the same time.” I’m going to repeat that, “one personal God who lives and works in three different ways at the same time.”
- You can’t find the word Trinity in the Bible or even a description of the Trinity in the Bible. There are passages where the various members of the Trinity are mentioned, but you can’t turn to a verse in the Bible where the Trinity is explained or even described. Church theologians developed the construct of the Trinity, though, from lots of different passages. One of them is today’s, Ephesians 4:1-7.

I picked it because I like that it emphasizes both the unity and the distinctiveness between God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. As far as unity goes, Paul uses the word “one” seven different times in this passage.

The last one of these says there is ONE Lord. Only one. This highlights the unity between God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit. There aren’t three separate gods; there is only one Lord. 7 times “one” comes up and the whole passage is only 106 words long! Every 15 words in this passage is “one.” Unity Unity Unity.

But this unity doesn't come without distinction. Also in this passage we hear separately about the Holy Spirit, and Jesus, and God the Creator. The passage tells us the Spirit gives us unity and Jesus gives us grace. Of course these are only part of how the Three-in-One, One-in-Three God relates to us. God created the whole world and made us in the divine image. Jesus redeems us and gives us salvation. The Holy Spirit challenges and leads us. All three do this, and far far more, as they relate to us. And this is usually how we think about the Trinity—how each manifestation of God relates to us.

But I want to think about the Trinity another way to help us move back toward the issue of polarization and what's the best way for us to find unity in the midst of such distinct perspectives.

Instead of focusing on how God, and Jesus, and the Holy Spirit relate to us, I want to think about how God, and Jesus, and the Holy Spirit relate to each other. To do that, we're going to learn a new word together. Perichoresis. Yep, p-e-r-i-c-h-o-r-e-s-i-s. Let's say it together. "Perichoresis." It comes from two Greek words.

The first is "peri," like in periscope or perimeter. It means "around."

The second is "choresis," which is from the same word as choreography. It means, "dance."

So perichoresis just means "dance around." But it sounds MUCH fancier.

Way back in the 7th century, John of Damascus thought that dancing around was the best way to describe how God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit are related to each other. All one God but somehow also three dancing around together in this perichoretic dance.

Back in seminary, we even had a "perichoretic dance." An actual dance move. Don't worry, I'm not going to ask you to do this with me. But if you happen to see me doing this dance, you'll know I'm thinking about the Trinity.

It's helpful to think of them dancing around because we get a picture of a relationship between them that is one based on joy and not on power; based on equality and not on subjugation; based on a desire to be together and not to go off on their own.

When we think about the way that the Trinity relates to each other in what Richard Rohr calls the Divine Dance, we see both unity and distinction—unity in that they are forever bound in the dance, and distinction in that each one—God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit—dances differently from the other.

Unity and Distinction, dancing together in joy and equality.

Does that describe the most recent political conversation you entered into on social media? Unity and Distinction, dancing together in joy and equality?

Or maybe it feels more like disunity and destruction, stomping around separately on power trips and put-downs.

That's why thinking about the Trinity can help us with the problem of polarization.

Polarization has been on the mind of scholar Arthur Brooks. He's the outgoing president of the American Enterprise Institute. We're hoping to get him here to speak later this spring to discuss this problem. In a recent interview he talked about how society is trending toward trying to shut down conversation by defaming, silencing, and ignoring people who disagree, especially on social media.

Brooks says,

When you demean others, "You don't solve problems...You perpetuate problems, and you simply build up power structures...All politics becomes...my tribe, your tribe. I'm going to get power, I'm going to deny you power."

It's no wonder that his upcoming book is called *The Culture of Contempt*.

But there's no contempt in the Trinity. Only unity in distinction, dancing together in joy and equality. God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit, working together to build each other up. No defamation or silencing or ignoring to be seen.

And don't forget—as Bill talked about two weeks ago, we are each made in God's image. That means we're each made in the image of the Trinity—the divine dance of joy and equality as we experience unity and distinction from each other.

It's remarkable, really, that this imprint of the three-in-one, one-in-three God is on us so strongly. In fact, a paleoanthropologist named Michael Tomasello of Duke University sheds light on how God's Trinitarian image shines through on humanity. For millennia, common wisdom held that what separates humanity from our closest relatives (gorillas, orangutans, chimps, etc.) was our ability to reason. But it turns out that the apes have these same gifts, though at a lower level.

What is unique to humanity—what I see as God's Trinitarian image coming through, although Tomasello himself does not frame it this way—is social cooperation and cognition. It's our ability to collaborate that sets us apart! As scholars Katie Douglass and Gordon Mikoski put it, that's why we can do everything from synchronized swimming to getting to the moon.

In short, we're made in the image of the divine dancer—distinction in unity, joy and equality.

But I think in this polarized world, we don't do such a good job of dancing like the Trinity. That's why the Adult Faith Formation team is exploring ways that we can empower each other to get better at entering into dialogues with people with whom we disagree. We like to think of it as “softening hearts, not changing minds.” We've engaged some elders and deacons in a couple of workshops and we are praying and planning now about how we can invite all of you into the process. Not only are we hoping to stop those fights with your in-laws, but we're hoping that we can be a catalyst for learning about polarization in Lake Forest/Lake Bluff.

We hope we'll all get better at following this divine dance...and as we do, maybe we'll also help others to learn a step or two, too.