

Sunday, May 30, 2021 (Trinity Sunday) | Sanctuary Worship Service

TEXT: [John 3:1–8, 16–17](#)

TITLE: **In This Together**

By the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf

There are many qualities I strive to nurture in my son: his deep affection for those he loves; his sense of humor; his attention to detail; his affinity for music in many forms; his curiosity. We are past the “why” phase of parenting—where one question begets an answer which sets off a stream of “Whys?”—no answer ever complete enough to satisfy the inquiry. Our child now is learning that one exciting way that he can engage his curiosity is by asking the best question—sometimes of himself, of his world, or of another. From here he can gather information, and put all of this wisdom together to see what he might learn. It is a process. It’s interactive. But it starts with him—and a question. Sometimes for a quick answer, he’ll address Siri: “Siri, what do ants eat?” he’ll ask. Or he’ll ask Alexa “Why don’t dogs talk the same way people do?” and laugh when Alexa answers with a series of barks.

While I may not always have the best or correct answer to his questions, I love that he asks them. “Mom, why do I have blood in my body?” “Mom, how do you think Pluto feels about being a dwarf planet?” “Mom, when is this virus going to end?” Asking questions is how we learn.

Now let’s admit it, questions don’t always lead to answers. In many—maybe even most—cases they lead to more questions. Questions help us notice that things are layered, complex, interconnected. Questions keep us humble—honing our awareness not only of the world around us, but also of how our own skills and tools are limited.

Questions help us to understand our world—and are tools for creating greater understanding in our world. Questions help us name problems—of science and society—and articulate a path forward. Questions unleash change.

Our Gospel lesson for today introduces us to a man with many questions. Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, comes to Jesus at night filled with questions. We aren’t quite sure why he shows up in the dark—maybe he’s embarrassed to be a leader who has questions—so often those with any authority are afraid to admit to what they don’t know. Maybe he’s afraid of what people will say if he is seen with Jesus. Maybe he, like many of us, was lying in bed at night trying to answer the many questions that were swirling in his head, and he knew that he wouldn’t be able to get a decent sleep if he didn’t just get to the heart of the matter.

Whatever compelled him, Nicodemus arrives before Jesus with some observations and some questions. He KNOWS that Jesus has come from God...but...HOW? And how can anyone be born again after they are old? How can it be—all of it? Jesus, rebirth, the Spirit’s power?

Now, I will confess that sometimes this text raises more questions for me than it does provide answers:

- Like Nicodemus, I wouldn't mind more details on what it means to be born from above, or born from the Spirit?
- But really, I want to ask Jesus about belief. Believe WHAT? What must belief look like to inherit eternal life? What if belief waffles? What if we believe SOME things but wonder about much more? And WHAT on earth happens to those who don't believe?

Raising questions is a quality of dynamic faith. While some mistake questions for doubting—and likewise mistake doubt for disbelief—questions can help us engage the mystery of our faith. Questions can help us understand God's engagement with the world and help us understand our own inability to fully understand the divine. But questions allow us to humbly explore how God is at work in the world and how God is present in our daily lives.

Today is Trinity Sunday in the liturgical calendar. The Sunday after Pentecost is named as a day when the church universal celebrates the power and mystery of a God who is one in three—Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. It's a claim about God that I heard for my whole life. At our dinner table we would begin our blessing with the “sign of the cross” — an invocation of the trinity. I, like many, was taught that this was how God IS. It was a given. One God, three persons; One hope for the world, three ways of engaging creation. And while my mind found it easy to imagine God engaging the world in different ways—even in different forms—I owned that the mysterious part for me to grasp was that all three persons exist all of the time.

The more I learned, however the more it was clear that the doctrine of the Trinity was the church's response to their collective set of questions unleashed by the presence of Jesus. How could the church maintain its belief in one God if Jesus is so clearly aligned with God? Was Jesus one with God or his own self? Was Jesus the firstborn of all creation—a creature just like us or was Jesus God too? And where did that leave the Holy Spirit that was gifted to the church? Was the Spirit subordinate to Christ or one with Christ? After all, the Spirit is named in Hebrew texts before Jesus ever seemed to enter the scene.

So in 325 AD, the Council of Nicea constructed the doctrine of the trinity—addressing all of these questions by affirming that Jesus is God. The Holy Spirit Too. The fancy word homoousios came from this conversation—same substance—naming that there was one unique Divine substance, but that the “Godhead” consists of three relationships within God's self—Creator/Redeemer/Sustainer or Parent/Child/Spirit. God within God's self IS relationship, established so that love has a trajectory that extends within God's own self and reaching out toward creation.

Let's be honest. Like Nicodemus we say, “How can this be?” It is impossible for three to equal one and one to be three. The tidiness of this construct is MESSY—it begets ore

questions...and a slew of helpful but quite imperfect analogies to try to assist our understanding.

Analogy #1: We say that **God is like water**—always the same molecular compound of H₂O, but can be found in different forms: ice, water, vapor. **While this analogy offers a** consistent image of one substance in three forms—with three ways of relating to the environment, the same molecular structure cannot exist in all three forms at once. The Triune God is ALWAYS creator, redeemer and sustainer – not a holy shape-shifter that changes between a creator, an incarnational Jesus, and the Spirit blowing in our midst. The analogy only works if H₂O can be ice, water and vapor always, all the time.

Analogy #2: **God is like an apple**: one in essence, with distinctly different parts (seeds, flesh, stem.) This gives us a way to name the unique attributes of each being as part of the larger whole, but each element of the apple was only a *part* of the whole. With God, each member of the trinity is always fully God.

Analogy #3: **God is like a person**, say, like Pastor Randy, who is a Father, a husband and a pastor all at the same time. And he is always each, and always himself. He is one person with three different ways of relating to the world. This analogy works well as an expression of how each person of the trinity embodies a different way in which God relates to the world: as creator, as redeemer, as sustainer. But it falls short when we observed that Randy only relates as father to Charlotte and Ian, is only a husband to Beth, and only a pastor to this congregation—and that these relationships had a start date. God is Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer to all, all of the time.

But soon we see what Nicodemus saw: The closer we get to understanding God, the more questions we have. The more we try to put God's nature into words, make comparisons to creation itself, the more questions we have about God's nature. The more we learn about God, the more we wonder about God. The more we learn from Christ, the more we ask about how we are to live like Christ. It is as if we find the spot for another piece of the puzzle, but also see that the puzzle will require way more pieces than we have to ever be completed.

And so, perhaps, with all of the questions it contains within, the doctrine of the trinity also offers us a north star to help us navigate the questions in our heart. For this trinitarian understanding of God affirms a truth claimed in scripture. Simply put: God is love." 1 John 4:16.

The Doctrine of the trinity holds the truth of a God who in God's own self embodies and emulates love. And this love extends outward to all of creation. The trinity articulates that the fundamental quality of a God is LOVE. God's love is not only evident in mighty acts about which we read in scripture, but is witnessed in each new sunrise, robin's egg, act of repentance, forgiveness extended. It is evidenced in every choice to not give up, every act to make society just, every Band-Aid placed on a skinned knee, every mourner embraced. God's love is revealed when we notice a unique quality in someone

so different from us and find them to be most beautiful. God's love is found among us as casseroles baked by neighbors, music that calms our spirits, the conviction that every embodiment of systemic oppression must end with us, today.

The Triune God bears witness to this love among us, continuing the work of creating, redeeming and sustaining here and NOW—in our lives and in our world, modeling our inextricable connectedness. It reminds us that our lives are woven together—when I plant a tree, it impacts the air you breathe. When you scrape a neighbor's windshield on a snowy day it makes the roadways safer for all. And when we catch our collective breath and choose a kind word in a moment of anger we model that something new IS possible with God's help.

The Triune God orients us continually to the fact that we were made for love—as individuals and as a community. God's vision for this world is love, in spite of our best efforts to build a kingdom based on hierarchy and oppression, greed and violence. God breaks through our own sinfulness and even our suffering asserting that love is the greatest power—and that it has the power to heal, transform, and make *all* things new.

So perhaps the most faithful things to do this Trinity Sunday is to sit in the questions, and wonder how they point us toward God's love. See, even as we approach God with our question, God holds out a question to us: Beloved child, how will YOU love?

Siblings, how can God's love be evident in our lives, through our lives? How is God's love, right now, changing us, stirring within us, calling to us, sending us out, strengthening us, and even our world? What might our lives look like if we focused on this love? How might our world be different if God's love was visibly at work upon us and through us?

I'm not going to offer any answers. I'm just going to offer a prayer:

God of love: May it be so.