

“The Dance”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for June 11th 2017 (Trinity Sunday)
by Foster Freed

2nd Corinthians 13: 11-13

Let's start by dispensing with an obvious half-truth, but a half-truth that is often put to use in order to discredit the central Christian teaching about God, namely the teaching of the Trinity. The half-truth to which I am referring, concerns an undeniable fact, namely that the doctrine of the Trinity only received its developed form in the fourth and fifth centuries, three to five hundred years after the life of Jesus. And yes, that is a fact. Nevertheless: the very fact that the Apostle Paul, a mere 25 years after Jesus' death, concluded what we refer to as his second letter to the Corinthians with the offering of a full-blown Trinitarian blessing ought to make it abundantly clear that the teaching of the Trinity was not something dreamt up by a group of latter-day Christian thinkers with too much time on their hands.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the companionship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. That's how the Apostle Paul signs off on this letter: a sign off that is all the more remarkable in light of Paul's thorough Jewishness as a thinker. Paul was not someone who was going to be at all comfortable with treating Jesus as “a” god...as might have been his practice had he come of age in a pagan setting. No: Paul was as devoted to a monotheistic understanding of God, as anyone who has ever walked this earth. And yet, having been a disciple for just over two decades, so convinced is he of the status and stature of Jesus Christ—and of the Spirit who came to the Church in the aftermath of Christ's resurrection—that Paul appears to have no reluctance but to offer a Trinitarian benediction at the conclusion of what is now regarded as one of his most important letters. The bottom line, for me at any rate, is that while it took centuries for the ancient Church to fully formulate the Trinitarian teaching, its roots are shockingly early...and they are shockingly early for a good reason.

As abstract as Trinitarian theology eventually becomes...as disturbingly conflicted as the Church eventually becomes over matters Trinitarian...and, indeed, as depressing as it is to ponder the implications of the charges of heresy and the declarations of anathema that various branches of the Church pronounced against one another's ways of speaking of Trinity, the fact remains that talk of the Trinity in Christian circles is born of Christian experience, above all the experience of the first generation of Christians. On the one hand, those who walked with Jesus during his time on this earth as well as those who were touched by the risen Christ in the aftermath of Easter—most of them, like Paul, pious monotheistic Jews—were astonished to discover their conviction that in Jesus Christ the living God had been in their midst. On the other hand, those who were filled with a spirit permitting them to see with clarity the truth about this Jesus, the truth about the God who had sent this Jesus to them, were no less astonished to discover their conviction that this spirit was, indeed, **the** Spirit, the Spirit of

the living God. Those twin convictions: the divinity of Christ...the divinity of the Spirit...were what left the early Church with no choice but to rethink their understanding of God. As Jews they were not prepared to simply welcome two new gods into an ever-expanding pantheon of gods. But as those who had been God-struck in Christ, they also knew that their understanding of the one God would never be the same. And so they spoke of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And so, by the time of his writing 2nd Corinthians, Paul is able to offer a benediction that blessed (and to this day continues to bless) readers of that letter with the hope that *the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the companionship of the Holy Spirit [will] be with one and all.*

Beyond that?

Well, beyond that two things. The first of those two things being...

...well, the first of those two things being a frank admission that when we attempt to nail the teaching of the Trinity down with too much self-confident precision, we quickly discover that it's easier said than done. All in all, I think we are far better at saying what we don't mean by Trinity than it is to define with absolute clarity what it is that we do mean. And so yes: what we don't mean is that we Christians worship three gods: that would be tri-theism not Trinitarianism. Nor do we believe that the One God simply wears different masks depending upon the occasion: that would be modalism! Nor do we believe that the one we call the Father is the one true God, with the Son and the Spirit serving as lesser gods: that would be what is known as subordinationism. Those are big no-no's. But having articulated what we want to say "no" to, it's far tougher to concisely spell out what it is that we want to say "yes" to! And you know, frankly, that is the way it ought to be. What makes the doctrine of the Trinity so central to the Christian faith, is also what ought to make it the place where we recognize that our words will always fall short of the mark, the place in which we acknowledge that our concepts will never point us unfailingly to our destination. To speak the language of Trinity, is to dare to speak a language that reveals to us the heart of God. Modesty and humility, rather than heresy trials and pronouncements of anathema ought to be our companions on this journey: a journey upon which we ought to embark with the clear recognition of the extent to which we approach a mystery far vaster than any other. Try doing justice, with your words, to the mystery of any human being you have ever encountered, even those you think you know best! Not easily done, now is it? And so we think we are going to do full justice to the divine mystery? Think again.

The other thing that ought to be named, here and now, concerns the fact that the teaching of the Trinity, rightly understood, is not merely a matter of abstract metaphysics. It's a mistake, I think, to isolate the final verse—the final benediction—of 2nd Corinthians, without linking it up to the larger benediction of which it forms a part. Before Paul gets around to signing off with the Trinitarian formula: *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the companionship of the Holy Spirit be with you all...*

...before Paul ends with that theological flourish, he first has this to say to his friends in Corinth.

Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. It is only on the heels of that profound charge, that he then speaks of the grace of Christ, the love of God, and the companionship of the Spirit. And I am reminded...

...reminded of something rather profound that was said at the Conference I attended in Toronto the week before last. One of the presenters was speaking of the way in which the doctrine of the Trinity plays a role—or fails to play a role—in the context of the United Church of Canada. And she made the point that the doctrine of the Trinity ought to be regarded as a practical teaching: not only because it is rooted in the experience (the lived experience) of the first generation of Christians, but because it can continue to inform and inspire the experience of subsequent generations of Christians: precisely because it models for us the kind of community that we, ourselves, ought to embody as followers of Jesus. A community grounded in joy. A community that aims for restoration when a sister or brother stumbles along the way. A community in which mutual comfort and encouragement is found. A community in which agreement in small things leads to peaceable accord in big things. A community in which God's own love and peace are manifested in the lives of those who worship God. And yes: a community in which true and deep and truly life-enhancing love—a deeply unselfish and mutually uplifting love—comes to be regarded as the coin of the realm. In short...

In short! A community that comes to partake of and participate in the very dance of love that is our God: no lonely giant in the sky, but a vibrant community in which the source of love (named as Father), the embodiment of love (named as Christ), and the Spirit of love (named as Holy) are continually in motion, seeking to incorporate all who will give themselves up to the dance; all who will step out in faith and in hope, to live the new life in Christ, a life in which love is our way and our destination.

May this dance be ours! May this life be ours! May this God claim us always as God's own. And yes: may the *grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the companionship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*

Amen!