

## **Disciples Together in Community: Romans 8:9-17**

Norwalk Christian Church, Trinity Sunday, Year B, Disciples Together Series

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This Summer, our sermons will be centered around the theme, *Disciples Together: The Weird and Wonderful Practices of Church*. As I said last week, we are going to celebrate all the weird, but wonderful, things we do together as church, and find our boldness again.

Next week will be our first combined worship service of the Summer and our theme will be “Holy Potlucks.” Next week is going to be fun.

This week...this week, not so fun. This week, we’re talking about the Trinity, and my brain is already hurting. The Sunday after Pentecost on the Christian Calendar is always Trinity Sunday, but most churches wouldn’t know it because we preachers LOVE to skip Trinity Sunday. It’s just so complicated...so, weird. And I was about to skip it, talk about other things, but then I remembered “talking about our weirdness” is what I said we were going to do, and what better way to be weird than talk about the Trinity.

When we talk about “Trinity” we are talking about the nature of God. Most Christians affirm that there is but one God, but our experience of God is in three persons. We sing about this in the Doxology: Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit. Three persons, one God.

But the word “Trinity” does not appear in scripture. We have texts like the one we read today, that mention in one place “God, Christ and Spirit.” The Doctrine of the Trinity really didn’t fully develop until 300 years after Jesus lived, in response to the teachings of a Bishop named Arius from the ancient city of Alexandria, Egypt. Arius taught that Jesus was not God, but created by God...sort of God lite, but not God fully.

Arius’ teaching began to spread, and other leaders became concerned. And then enters Emperor Constantine. You may remember from History class, he was the first Christian emperor (though he was more Emperor than Christian). Constantine realized this division was creating two separate churches, and that would *not* be good for him politically. So, he decides to deal with it, once and for all, and summons all the Bishops, Church leaders to a council in the city of Nicaea, modern day Turkey.

See, even from very early on, the church has gotten itself all messed up in politics.

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It was called the Council of Nicea, and it was some event: more than 300 bishops were there. There were arguments, fights. It lasted for several months, and they discussed everything from which books belonged in the Bible, to the proper date of Easter, and, of course, if Arius and his followers would burn in hell eternally for heresy. Sounds fun!

At the end of the debate, the majority disagreed with Arius, and together--with the heavy hand of the Emperor--they wrote the Nicene Creed, which was to settle the argument once and for all, and they excommunicated Arius as a heretic.

Now, I want you to open your Red Hymnal, and turn to page 358. No, the sermon is not over. There you will find the “Nicene Affirmation of Faith.” This is the Creed they wrote. You didn’t know it was in your hymnal, did you?

We won’t recite it together. That might bring back too many memories from your days in other church traditions when you recited it every week. But read along as I read it:

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ (and here is where it starts getting detailed...you can feel the controversy), the *only* Son of God, *eternally begotten* of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, *begotten, not made, of one Being* with the Father; through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets. We believe in the one holy catholic/universal and apostolic church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Whew! Aren’t you glad we don’t say that every week? It is a beautiful statement...and you know, I believe a lot of it...maybe most of it...I think?

It is crafted, perfectly, to refute every argument of Arius and his fellow Christians, to prove that they were wrong. And from that point on, this creed became the standard belief statement of the church. It was the measure of who was in, and who was out.

Christians have taken up arms and killed heretics who did not agree with the Nicene Creed. Even today, many use this creed as the litmus test for who is a true Christian, while usually adding a long list about other required beliefs about end times, marriage, the inspiration of scripture, and the ministry of women.

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If all this talk of Creeds and Doctrines is making you even more annoyed than you are bored, then you might be a good Disciple. We members of Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) don't really care for Creeds. No one's going to tell us what we have to believe!

But to reduce the Trinity to a doctrine to be believed, and use that doctrine as a test of who is in and out of God's love--that, is as contrary to the very nature and spirit of the Trinity as you could possibly be!

The Trinity, whatever the details may be, is about God in community. God, not existing as some lonely, grumpy old legalistic man in the sky, but God, in God's very nature, communal.

In the Hebrew story of Creation, recorded in Genesis 1, God says to God, "Let us make humankind in *our* image, according to *our* likeness." Most of the time you see the word "God" in your English Old Testaments, it is a translation of the Hebrew word "Elohim" which is a plural noun. God's very name in Hebrew is plural.

In the text we read from Romans, Paul isn't debating the Trinity--he wouldn't know what we were even talking about. But the notion of God existing in community is all over the place. Now, you should know, that every time you see the word "you" in this passage we just read, it's not you, singular, it's you plural...or, as Marti and I say, "y'all".

"Y'all", Paul says, "are in the Spirit." "The Spirit of God dwells in y'all." And "Christ is in y'all, too." "And the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in y'all too!" "And since this experience of God lives in all y'all, live like it! Be led by this Spirit of God that's alive in y'all."

Or, in short: All of God is in all of y'all! And to experience this community we call church, in all it's glorious imperfections and weirdness, is to experience God.

A few years ago, the United Church of Christ pastor from Chicagoland, Lillian Daniel, caused quite a stir with a snarky essay she wrote that went viral on the internet: "Spiritual but Not Religious? Please Stop Boring Me."<sup>1</sup>

She writes, "*On airplanes, I dread the conversation with the person who finds out I am a minister and wants to use the flight time to explain to me that he is 'spiritual but not religious.'* Such a person will always share this as if it is some kind of daring insight, unique to him, bold in its rebellion against the religious status quo.

*"Next thing you know, he's telling me that he finds God in the sunsets.... And in walks on the beach. Sometimes I think these people never leave the beach or the mountains,*

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.ucc.org/feed-your-spirit\\_daily-devotional\\_spiritual-but-not-religious](http://www.ucc.org/feed-your-spirit_daily-devotional_spiritual-but-not-religious)

*what with all the communing with God they do on hilltops, hiking trails and . . . did I mention the beach at sunset yet?*

*“Like people who go to church don't see God in the sunset!*

*“Being privately spiritual but not religious just doesn't interest me. There is nothing challenging about having deep thoughts all by oneself. What is interesting is doing this work in community, where other people might call you on stuff, or heaven forbid, disagree with you. Where life with God gets rich and provocative is when you dig deeply into a tradition that you did not invent all for yourself.*

*“Can I switch seats now and sit next to someone who has been shaped by a mighty cloud of witnesses instead? Can I spend my time talking to someone brave enough to encounter God in a real human community? Because when this flight gets choppy, that's who I want by my side, holding my hand, saying a prayer and simply putting up with me, just like we try to do in church.”*

I'll be honest: This Trinity stuff...it makes my head hurt. Force to write down what I believe in a Creed, I don't know what I'd write down. And thank God I don't have to.

But this Trinitarian Nature of God, this God, existing in community and calling us to do the same--this I believe.

What I have a hard time with, is when people say that God is some static being, who always is the way God always was. Oh, and God's a HE, too, right...a Father...because how could God be male and female? This picture of God is not scriptural. Read through the Scriptures; God is always adapting. Maybe it's that the people writing down the scripture are learning more about God's nature; maybe God is doing some learning, too, as God's relationship with humanity and with the Trinity grows.

Why wouldn't this be the case? When God's very nature is community--a Trinity--this is what you would expect. You cannot have true community without being changed by it.

If you don't want to change, then live as a hermit, isolated from society and all alone. But when you're with someone, your edges are rounded off. You learn, you grow, you change. To change, to learn from one's experiences...this is being like God.

God as Trinity. God as community. God, diverse and big enough for all of us. God, male, female, spirit, person--and so, so much more. God, growing and learning.

God, never contained in a doctrine. God, alive in us, alive when Disciples come together into this imperfect, quirky, weird but great cloud of witnesses we call Church!

This is the Trinity. And it is so very weird but so, so beautiful.