

SERMON
St. John's Episcopal Church, Roanoke, VA
The Rev. Alexander H. Webb II, Curate
June 19, 2011

<p>The First Sunday after Pentecost ~ Trinity Sunday Revised Common Lectionary (Year A) Matthew 28:16-20</p>

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In his treatise *On Reading and Writing*, noted atheist Friedrich Nietzsche wrote the following:

“Without music, life would be a mistake...I would only believe in a God who knew how to dance.”¹

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, this is Trinity Sunday. On this day, we celebrate one of the most sacred and complex doctrines in the whole corpus of Christian theology. Today we celebrate that mystifying idea that ours is a God who can simultaneously be both one and three; that mystifying idea that ours is a God who knows how to dance.

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I, myself, have never been much of a dancer.

Awkward and clumsy, introverted and self-conscious, I have always preferred to watch dancers than become one myself. But, from the margins of the parquet floor, the beauty of dance has never been lost on me; its movements are intricate, its fluidity bliss.

Two beautifully dressed people with polished shoes move in and out, around and through in such synchronicity that they never miss a step. Following the beat, faster and faster, the pair moves as one, the boundaries between them beginning to blur. In just a moment, the two have become one to such an extent that it becomes hard to say where one ends and the other begins.

The first part of the twentieth century was replete with exceptional dancers: Gene Kelly and Debbie Reynolds, Anna Pavlova and Mikhail Baryshnikov, to name only a few. But, from that great constellation of tappers, flappers, and troupes emerged two stars that shined brighter than the rest.

With an Oscar, two Emmys, and three Golden Globes to his credit, many would say that Fred Astaire was the finest dancer ever to grace the silver screen. And, Ginger Rogers, his longtime dance partner, was right there with him. Ginger was right there with him, doing it all – backwards and in heels!

Fred and Ginger's fame came not from their individual talent, exceptional though it was. Fred and Ginger's fame came from the way that they moved together, interacting with each other so perfectly,

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche. *Vom Lesen und Schreiben*, Part I, Chapter 7.

so intimately, that though two they became one. The beauty of their unity was something greater than either of them could have achieved on their own.

Thus it is with God: Father, and Son, and Holy Spirit – three distinct, yet equally divine, and equally eternal aspects of the one God, moving together so perfectly, so intimately, that the distinctions between them begin to blur. In their unity, they become something infinitely more complex and infinitely more beautiful than any of them would have been on their own.²

Ours is a God who knows how to dance.

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Last October, I attended a wedding. At the reception, I whispered to my dance partner, “You’ll have to lead, because I don’t know how.” Much to my chagrin, she whispered back, “Neither do I.”

We were doomed. Well, at least I thought that we were doomed.

Over the next few hours, I came to realize that two people really can learn to anticipate one another. We were not about to challenge Fred and Ginger, but once we learned to move together, we discovered that neither one of us had to lead. Each step and turn was ours – truly ours, not hers, not mine. We were partners, co-equal in every way.

It is tempting for us to think about God’s three persons in terms of their discreet functions. The argument goes something like this: The first person of God created the world, the second saved us from our sins, and the third person abides with us now, inspiring our lives today.

This model is clean and easy, but it does not capture the true essence of our God. Each member of the Holy Trinity is co-eternal, co-equal, and co-participatory. They are partners. No one leads, and no one follows. At all times, all three of God’s persons dance together in perfect synchronicity.

In Genesis, God says on the sixth day of creation, “Let *us* make humankind in *our* image, according to *our* likeness.”³ In the gospel, St. John writes of Jesus, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was *with* God, and the Word *was* God.”⁴ In Isaiah, God summons a new prophet by saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for *us*?”⁵

The fundamental tenet of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is this: There is only one God.⁶ There is only one God. But, as Christians, we believe that eternity has been defined by the perfect, intimate, and even musical interrelationship of that one God’s three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

² In theological terms, this understanding of Trinitarian interrelation is known as *perichoresis*.

³ Genesis 1:26 (NRSV)

⁴ John 1:1 (NRSV)

⁵ Isaiah 6:8 (NRSV)

⁶ Cf., Deuteronomy 6:4 (יהוה אחד) – Hear, O Israel, the LORD is our God, the LORD is one.)

Together, they were all at work in creation. Together, they were all at work in the re-creation of the world through Christ. And, together, they are all at work in our hearts today, inspiring us to live lives of selflessness, integrity, and compassion.

The Father's work was not finished in creation and the Son's work was not finished at the resurrection. The God we know, the God we serve, and the God we love has been dancing in three-part harmony since the very beginning.

God danced in the beginning, and God is dancing still.

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In today's reading from the end of St. Matthew's Gospel, Jesus gives his disciples a great commission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..."

Jesus' final words in Matthew's Gospel are an invitation for the whole world to join God in his eternal dance. Jesus' final words are an invitation to let the three persons of God's Holy Trinity move in and out of us, around and through us.

The great grace of God existing as a community of three persons is that there is always room for us right in the middle of their circle. God has invited us to join him in his dance, but the choice is ours. We can sit on the side, watching the dancers from afar, or we can move with God and allow God to move in us: fluidly, intimately, musically.

There is a secular song by contemporary songwriter Lee Ann Womack that ends like this, "And when you get the chance to sit it out or dance, I hope you dance." Womack's words ring true for me this Trinity Sunday.

We can choose to stand idle, or we can become God's hands and feet in the world. We can choose to stand idle, or we can share God's love with others. We can choose to stand idle, or we can dance with the one who has been dancing through eternity, with the one who has invited us to dance in his very presence.

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I must cautiously – very cautiously! – agree here with Friedrich Nietzsche: I could only ever believe in a God who knew how to dance. And, thanks be to God, ours is a God who does.

Amen.