

July 4, 2010
Matthew 28:16-20
Creekside COB

**“Interdependence Day”
Rosanna McFadden**

Purpose: To see the Trinity as a model for Christian relationships

Good morning! I’m happy for the opportunity to preach here at Creekside, even if it means you’re having to see a lot of me this morning. I understand that Pastor Janet usually begins her sermons with a joke or a funny story. Well, that’s not going to happen today. I’m going to start with a quiz: Janet might make you laugh; I’m going to make you work. In preparation for this sermon, I have been thinking in threes, and I’d like to invite you to do that, as well. My family has a game called TriBond -- are any of you familiar with it? I give you the names of three different things, and you have to guess how they are all related. I’ll give you an example so you have an idea how it goes, and then we’ll try some together.

Sail Row Tug [Boats]

Are you ready? If you know the answer, just shout it out.

Engagement Wedding Boxing [they’re all rings]

Mustang Cougar Impala [Cars]

Gala Jazz Macintosh [Apples]

Red White Blue [colors of flags of United States, and 29 other countries, including Australia, Chile, Dominican Republic, France, Iceland, Netherlands, Russia, Thailand]

King Queen Twin [Mattress sizes]

Father Son Holy Spirit [Members of the Trinity]

It's this last set of three, the Trinity, that I particularly want to focus on this morning. There actually is a Sunday in the Christian year that is designated as Trinity Sunday: it's typically the first Sunday after Pentecost, following the birthday of the church and the activity of the Holy Spirit. Obviously I'm scrambling the order of the season a bit, but I think I can get away with it for a few reasons: first of all, none of you are likely to come up here and stop me (please don't try). Secondly, and more to the point, unlike other holidays like say, Christmas or Easter or the 4th of July, Trinity Sunday is not an observance of a specific historical event. The Trinity is a doctrine of the Church, and in fact, the word "Trinity" doesn't even appear in the Bible, although the concept is certainly there. Some people have scoffed at the idea of setting aside a specific Sunday as Trinity Sunday, because the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit should be self-evident in all our worship. It would be like having "Jesus is Lord" Sunday, or "God is Love" Sunday. We ought to be saying that every Sunday, right? I agree, but just because something is obvious, doesn't make it wrong to mention it. What would be wrong would be to relegate the Trinity to a single Sunday of the year, and to ignore it the other 51. Finally, I think it's especially important to talk about the Trinity on this day when we and many other people in our country are observing Independence Day. Sometimes the messages that come from the Bible run counter to things our society tells us to believe. I think that the biblical concept of the Trinity provides a model for how we as Christians can relate to those in our families, our churches, and our community, and how a Christian nation should relate to the rest of the world.

It is worth noting that when Christ lived and taught, there was no such thing as a Christian nation -- in fact, there wasn't even a Jewish nation. There was a Jewish homeland which was occupied by the Roman army for all of Jesus' life and into the later writings of the NT, so the Bible does not give us explicit teaching about what a Christian nation would look like or how it should behave. It wasn't until Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in 313 that Christians

could even think of themselves as owing allegiance to any kingdom besides the kingdom of God. The earliest statements about the Trinity come from the Council of Nicaea, convened by Constantine in 325, in order to be sure that the many converts in the Roman Empire were all subscribing to the same version of Christianity. Normally, the phrase “Church doctrine” is a signal that something boring and tedious is about to be discussed. But passions ran deep and speakers ran long at the Council of Nicaea: discussion about the Trinity -- especially the divine and human nature of Christ -- went on for about two months. At one point, Arius, who was arguing for the losing side which said that Jesus was completely divine, and only pretending to be human, got so angry that he stood up and walked across the council room and slapped Nicholas of Myrna -- a North African bishop we would come to know as ‘Santa Claus.’

So, back then theology was a contact sport. But does this doctrine mean anything for how we live today? I hope so. The doctrine of the Trinity asserts that God is one, but within that singularity, there are three entities which function distinctly, but cooperatively. This isn't an easy concept -- either to explain or to understand. Rather than using just words, I've tried to illustrate it in some other ways this morning. Take a look at the worship table. It has been said that visual representations of biblical truths, like the stained glass windows in medieval cathedrals, were there to teach the ignorant and the illiterate. They are also helpful for people like me. Concrete *stuff* gives me a way to imagine abstract concepts. How many candles are on the worship table? [One] How many flames? [Three] That's a very simple illustration. Now look at the figure on the table runner. This is borrowed from a Celtic Christian symbol of the Trinity. Notice how one single line forms three points, and how they are all interwoven with a circle which has no beginning and no end. This is an ancient image of the eternal interdependence of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I'd like to show you one more -- not on the worship table, but on the screen.

You may have seen this image before; it is an icon painted by Andrei Rublev in the 15th century. It is a stylized, but much more human representation of the Trinity -- three beings (originally angels), each differently dressed but similar, seated around a single table, sharing a common cup. This may seem overly formal or outdated, but it bears a striking resemblance to the characters in William P. Young's 2007 blockbuster novel *The Shack*. In that book, the protagonist faces a terrible event from his past through an encounter with the Trinity. Although there are individual encounters with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one of the things they do is prepare and eat meals together. It turns out that God the Father is a black woman who can really cook.

Connection, community, and sharing are things we can learn from the Trinity. Working together for a common goal, service, love for one another -- these images of interdependence have been woven into our Brethren heritage, as well. At our best, we model this behavior in all parts of our lives: in the way we treat our children and our parents, how we interact with co-workers and the people we go to church with, how Brethren speak to each other and treat each other at Annual Conference. But interdependence has never been easy -- and it is even less so in a country which values and celebrates independence. In the United States, we have enough natural resources, and many people are willing to work hard enough that in some cases a single wage-earner can support an entire family. This is nearly impossible in many parts of the world, where extended families live in the same house or cluster of houses, and even children must help with basic tasks like carrying water, tending livestock and gathering fuel. Families must rely on each other for survival, and it takes a village to raise a child. I am happy to enjoy a level of prosperity which means that I don't have to spend my days carrying water or grinding grain, but I realize that this prosperity can give me the illusion of self-sufficiency. The reality is that I could not survive without other people, not just financially, but emotionally and spiritually as well. I believe that it is through the grace of God that I have what I need --

some of it I have worked for, and Tim has certainly worked for, but some of the things which are most precious to me are things which I have not earned. Americans are often incredibly generous -- we give millions of dollars to crisis relief in places like Haiti -- but we struggle with smaller acts of interdependence, like carpooling, or sharing laundry facilities in an apartment building.

Part of what makes this difficult is our tendency to confuse equality with interdependence. Equality is a social and political construct, where people or groups of people who have been restricted or denied opportunities are granted equal access to them. While I'm in favor of equality, I have to acknowledge that it is not the model we get from the Bible. I think of the great hymn in Philippians 2, which says, "Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death -- even death on a cross." Interdependence is much more radical than equality. Interdependence is the acknowledgement by those who have power -- people like us who have physical resources and a voice in government and military might -- that we need other people. Interdependence is the confession that even with great power and good intentions, the United States cannot save the world. Only God can do that. And God works through our humility, not our arrogance. What happened after Jesus was willing to humble himself to the point of death on a cross? Philippians goes on, "Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father."

The message of interdependence is for all people and all nations, because all people and all nations owe their allegiance to God. The model of the Trinity is as relevant to people with power today as it

was to the group of frightened and doubting disciples nearly 2,000 years ago. It is this command and this promise that Jesus delivered as his last words to his disciples, and that I leave with you today: “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, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always even to the end of the age.” Amen.