

Relationship

It comes about this time every year. On the liturgical calendar, it's always the first Sunday after Pentecost. It's Trinity Sunday, the only Sunday of the Christian year that takes its name from a doctrine: the doctrine of the Trinity.

Now I hope you won't go to sleep with your eyes open just because you heard the word *doctrine*. The Trinity may be the greatest mystery of our faith, but it's at our extreme center, at the very heart of who we are. Faith in the Holy Trinity stands at the head of the Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church. Article One states that, "in the unity of this Godhead there are three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity."

As Christians, we are defined by belief in a particular God who is one in three. We can't talk about God without talking about Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And we can't talk about Creator, Christ, and Spirit without talking about God, because, as John Wesley affirms, "these three are one." The Trinity is our way to talk about the reality of God revealed through Holy Scripture; about who this God is and about what this God does.

So: to reflect on this triune God, what better place to begin than at the beginning? This One whose name is I AM, this reality who is Being,

is the beginning and is *in* the beginning before anything else exists. We understand through the biblical message that this One is threefold. The prologue to John's Gospel tells us of the Incarnate Word coming as Jesus the Christ: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word *was* God...All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being."

And in the creation story from Genesis, did you hear the words, "a wind from God swept over the face of the waters"? A wind from God. Now most of us don't read Hebrew, the language in which the Old Testament was written. So in comprehending the sense of the original text, it's helpful to know that Hebrew is a very connotative language. One particular word can have several different meanings. In Hebrew, the word for *wind* also means *breath* and *spirit*. So we discern the creative presence of God's Spirit moving across the deep, and we perceive the creative presence of this same Holy Spirit breathing life into the nostrils of the first human being. And, just as when "God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light," we hear God's Word in every act of creation. The teaching of Scripture points to the creative activity of each of three co-eternal "persons" in this One God. In relationship, Creator, Christ and Spirit fashion the world as One.

God creates humankind in God's image, a truth that nuances our reading of the divine instruction to human beings on how we are to treat the earth and its creatures. When the first humans are told to *subdue* the

earth, the word in the Hebrew text actually means to act in relationship with God in carrying out God's intention for the good creation: to work toward increasing its beauty, its promise, its perfection; toward making the earth a place that, with heaven, proclaims God's glory. When the first humans, created in the image of God, are told to *have dominion over* every living thing, those words in the Hebrew text convey neither control nor exploitation nor cruelty, but caring, nurturing relationship with non-human animals. To both humans and animals, God has given every plant on earth for food.

This triune God is not like a watchmaker who sets the world to run and then moves away to let it operate on its own. No. This God is intimately involved with creaturely life, provident and compassionate. However, we have been designed with the ability to make choices. An omnipotent sovereign with the power to govern every detail of your existence and mine, reducing us to robots, God who makes us in God's image instead gives us freedom of the will.

With that freedom comes sin's entrance into the world. With that freedom comes the power to destroy. Human beings have destroyed one another. Human beings have destroyed God's non-human creatures, as individuals and as groups. Species after species vanish from the face of the earth. Human beings have destroyed much of the beauty and goodness of God's creation. Just last week, a *Post and Courier* editorial recommended that the South Carolina legislature safeguard laws

protecting thousands of acres of coastal wetlands. It's telling that such editorials should be necessary. With little regard for the earth and its resources, and with the development of nuclear weapons, humanity stands on the brink of destroying itself and the world God has created.

When we hear the creation account in Genesis, we may get the impression that creation was a one-time event. "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth..." Actually, a more accurate translation of the Bible's very first verse would read, "When God *began* to create heaven and earth." Divine creative activity has continued throughout each moment of all the millennia since the world began. As I speak to you today, God continues to create, in a process that will endure into the end of time.

Yet the fact of God's ongoing creation, and the truth that Christ will ultimately redeem the creation, do not absolve you and me from responsibility to act with integrity toward the earth and all life on it. God still charges us who are created in God's image to be stewards of the good creation, to care for all that has been entrusted to us. A wise person once observed that "we don't inherit the earth from our parents; we borrow it from our children."

Truly, we stand at a critical juncture. Surely we live at a crucial time in human history. The choices we make in this twenty-first century will determine the goodness and beauty of the earth we hand over to unborn generations. Will we continue to over-develop and to destroy

habitats, causing God's creatures to become extinct? Or will we value as sacred each life designed by God, animal as well as human? Will we harness and utilize renewable energy sources, in order that air may be breathable and water may be drinkable; in order that the global climate may remain able to sustain life in centuries to come? It's estimated that one billion people—one sixth of the planet's population—are starving. Will we address world hunger, striving to ensure that all have a share of the world's resources? God gives you and me freedom of choice, and the serious choices we make today impact the future of God's creation. The choices we make today must reflect our life in the triune God who has made us and whose we are. Because you and I are created in the image of God, our relationship to the earth, to non-human animals, and to one another is to be patterned after God's relationship to us. We are called to relational, providential, compassionate care.

As "Our Social Creed" puts it, "We affirm the natural world as God's handiwork and dedicate ourselves to its preservation, enhancement, and faithful use by humankind." On this Sunday, the United Methodist Church celebrates the one-hundredth anniversary of "Our Social Creed," found in *The United Methodist Book of Discipline* and in your bulletin. In a few moments, as we read it together as our affirmation of faith today, I invite you to reflect on its trinitarian words that shape our identity and guide all our relationships: confession of

belief in the Creator, in the Redeemer of Creation, in the Holy Spirit, “through whom we acknowledge God’s gifts.”

On this Trinity Sunday, we contemplate the deep mystery of this threefold God whose inner communion is profoundly relational. Creator, Christ, and Spirit continually reach out to one another in love, and this triune God draws *us* into the circle as well: inviting, including, immeasurably loving. Because we are created in God’s image, our own relationships are modeled on this endlessly flowing divine community of love. Christianity, a trinitarian faith, is not a faith to be practiced in solitude. To grow in Christ, we need one another. We come together in community, affirming the goodness of the creation, living eternally in loving relationship with God the Creator, God the Christ, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.