

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Place a candle, bowl of water, and plant at the center of your group. Pray together this prayer from Sunday's second reading, 2 Corinthians 13.11-13.

LEADER: Brothers and sisters, mend your ways.

ALL: Let us encourage one another.

LEADER: Live in harmony and peace.

ALL: Let us encourage one another.

LEADER: Then the God of love and peace will be with us.

ALL: Let us encourage one another.

LEADER: Greet one another with a holy kiss.

Group members exchange a sign of peace and harmony.

ALL: The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

Some theologians today have reclaimed the Greek word *perichoresis*, which earlier theologians used to describe the Trinity interrelating dynamically as three persons in one love. English speakers know the prefix *peri*, for example, in the word *perimeter*, meaning *all around, near*. We know *chores* from doing them every day.

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY



My yearly bike trip to see the Showy Ladyslippers in bloom is a chore of delight. I know where to look on the Paul Bunyan Trail for plants blooming among the birches. Every year I find the delicate white orchid with its magenta slipper awesome all over again. State law

says no picking, no digging up. Instead I make a pilgrimage to venerate this miracle of creation, making the rounds to pay attention.

I can imagine the persons of the Trinity delighting in each other as I do in their creation. *Perichoresis* gives us a picture of three persons in one love interacting dynamically, making the rounds of each other as in a dance, reciprocally and mutually exchanging beauty and delight.

● What chores of delight do you do? What is your experience of participating in the harmonies of a chorus?

● What rounds do you regularly make in prayer for family members?

The Greek lexicon explains that *chor* means *to dance around*. A chorus is a joyful round dance, circling, intertwining. In Broadway musicals a chorus sings and dances, creating joy. In any chorus singers intertwine their voices in both harmony and unity.

A chore refers to a regular task that involves getting out and about, such as feeding animals and taking out the trash. Doctors make rounds to check on their patients. Chores may evoke feelings of drudgery, but I have happy memories of following my dad to feed the cows, pick up eggs in the henhouse, give the kitties milk.

GOSPEL

God so loves the world.

JESUS: Yes, God so loved the world, that God gave God's only Son, that whoever believes in him may not die but may have eternal life. God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him.

Whoever believes in him avoids condemnation, but whoever does not believe is already condemned for not believing in the name of the only Son of God.

John 3.16-18



God exists not first as one and then as three, but God exists as persons-in-communion.

These Greek theologians use the word *perichoresis* in imaging the Trinity as persons-in-communion, who exist in a kind of divine round dance in which no one person is superior or inferior to the other. The three persons together form one source of life, one source of our being, which like theirs is being-in-relation.

Unlike the round dance image, the common two-men-and-a-bird image creates a problem. It leads us to see the three persons of the Trinity in an order of importance and chronology—the oldest man first, the Father; then the young man, the Son; and finally the bird, the usually neglected if not forgotten Spirit.

In the image of making rounds, God is a dynamic community, and a community of equals becomes our human ideal. The *perichoresis* image eliminates the subordination implicit in patriarchal order: the Father first, the Son and Spirit subordinate. It counters our easy assumption when we make the *Sign of the Cross* that the Father is first, then Son, then Spirit in an hierarchical order. Using the circle image of the Trinity allows us to see God as the shared life at the heart of the universe.

It is this image of three persons in God sharing life,

God is the shared life at the heart of the universe.

During Jesus' lifetime his disciples recognize he is an exceptional man who has come in God's name and calls God Father and source of all. After his resurrection, Jesus' disciples experience the risen Jesus with them, and as Jesus promised, they also experience the Spirit of God working in their hearts and animating their lives. Out of these experiences of God beyond them, with them, within them, above them, alongside them, around them come the first understanding of God as triune.

To express their experience of the triune God, the early Church theologians turned to Greek philosophy, using the metaphysical terms of substance and essence. In the 4th century Arius, for whom the heresy of Arianism is named, taught that Jesus was of a different substance than God and therefore subordinate. His teaching threatened to decrease

the importance of God's becoming human in Jesus—the incarnation. Other Church fathers and mothers argued that Jesus was of the same substance of God but a different person.

Some of us have studied these Christological controversies in high school or college until our heads hurt. We can't help but wonder what difference these ancient definitions make to us. Yet, we profess these doctrines the early Church councils approved when we pray the Creed at Mass and make our baptismal promises.

● **What is at stake for you in our faith that Jesus is truly human and truly divine?**

The Greek theologians Gregory Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa were especially helpful in imaging the Trinity. They use the term *person* to name Christians' experience of God as three. They understand God's very nature as free and relational.

rather than the image of the monarch on a throne, that is the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. This image of divine, dynamic communion allows us to believe that God, who is constantly loving and being loved in the Trinity, is the same God who is constantly loving us and all of life—our world, the universe, life beyond us we can't even imagine.

Once we no longer image God as an isolated, aloof monarch, we realize we should not live isolated lives either. Bonds of love and ever-generating life link us and all of creation to God.

● **In her book *She Who Is*, Elizabeth Johnson asks, if we have the choice between “an isolated, static, ruling monarch and a relational, dynamic, tripersonal mystery of love—who would not opt for the latter?” (192). Which God do you choose?**

Theological language and the language of our Creeds sometimes lead us to think we have God labeled and understood. For instance, God is creator, redeemer, sanctifier. But God is also always mystery. We, who know how hard it is to understand another person like ourselves, must stand speechless before God.

We must constantly be aware that when we use language to name God, we are only using metaphors. When we call God father, we are only saying God



is like fathers we know. We, and the scriptures, also call God mother, friend, and lover. These, too, are only images.

Many people, especially women, experience a problem in our use of so much male language to name God. Sometimes maleness seems the essence of the triune God. As theologians point out, if God is male, then the male is God. None of us wants to limit God to being in our image, and especially not just to one gender image. It is important to name God as richly and fully as we can.

● **Share names of God that have meaning for you and have helped you call on God in times of difficulty or of joy.**

In the Trinity an irrepressibly loving, creative communion of persons animates the communion of life that is our created existence. It is God, three in one love, who acts in our cosmos. The scriptures record people's experience of God's presence in many ways.

At creation the Genesis story pictures God as Spirit, initiating, enlivening, and

sustaining life. The Spirit stirs the waters (Genesis 1.2). The breath or spirit of God makes the human a living being (Genesis 2.7).

Other parts of Hebrew scriptures imagine God as a king enthroned,

an image familiar to people of these early times, and one which evokes the image of Father.

When we proclaim Jesus' life and ministry, we think of both the Father who sent Jesus and the Spirit whom we see actively at work in Jesus in his conception (Luke 1.35), at his baptism (Luke 3.21-22), and in the work of bringing good news to the poor which the Spirit impels him to do (Luke 4.16-21). After the resurrection, Jesus is at God's right hand, sending the Spirit to the community on earth who gather in his name.

Sometimes the scriptures emphasize Spirit, sometimes Father, sometimes Son, the incarnate Jesus. But it is always God in the richness of all three persons who is acting. All of these images and stories bring us back to the main truth Trinity Sunday celebrates—we have never seen God, but we can trust that God is the compassionate, liberating, loving God we have encountered through Jesus.

● **What difference does how we image the Trinity make in your life?**

God comes along in Israel's company.

God and Moses have been through a lot by the time we get to chapter 34 of Exodus. In chapter 20 God calls Moses up the mountain to tell him the terms of the covenant between God and Israel—the Ten Commandments. Moses comes back to the people and writes down God's terms for them. The people gladly agree, but when Moses goes back to talk to God and receive the Commandments inscribed on two stone tablets, the people grow restless and make a golden calf to worship.

On coming back down the mountain, Moses sees the calf and hurls the tablets with the commandments to the ground, breaking them. At the beginning of Sunday's reading he is going back to talk to God again, taking along a substitute pair of tablets.

God, whom we might expect by this time to be irritated and impatient, instead gives Moses a bonus. God speaks the divine name Yahweh, which Jews never say aloud but replace with the title *Adonai*, commonly translated in English *Lord*. The

passage insists the Holy One is slow to anger and rich in kindness.

God's words give Moses the perfect opening and Moses is not slow to pick up on the opportunity. He invites God: Come along with us. If you want someone to practice loving and patience and fidelity with, come along in our company.

Moses meets with God.

Early in the morning Moses went up Mount Sinai as the Holy One had commanded him taking along the two stone tablets. The Holy One descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name, "Yahweh." The Holy One passed before him and proclaimed, "The Holy One, the Lord, a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in kindness and fidelity."

Moses at once bowed down to the ground in worship. Then he said, "If I find favor with you, O Holy One, do come along in our company. This is indeed a stiff-necked people; yet pardon our wickedness and sins, and receive us as your own."

Exodus 34.4-6,8-9

● Review words and phrases you have used that communicate negative concepts about God: "God will get you for that." "God hates me." "God likes good girls or good boys better." Commit to giving up all negative language about God.

Joan Mitchell, CSJ, editor of *Sunday by Sunday*, holds a Masters in Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School and a Ph.D. in New Testament from Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN.

PRAY



Gather around the candle, bowl of water, and flowering plant. To conclude your reflection on the Trinity pray the following images which Elizabeth Johnson adapts from the Church father Tertullian (*She Who Is*, New York: Crossroad, 1992).

LEADER 1: God is mystery, one God, three divine persons.

ALL: Receive us, kind and compassionate God, as your own.

LEADER 2: (*Lights candle at center of group.*) Let us imagine God as light. God, the source of all, is the sun. Jesus, who is God incarnate, is the same light streaming to earth, a sunbeam. Spirit is the point of light that arrives on earth as warmth and energy.

ALL: All one shining light.

LEADER 3: (*Dips hand into bowl of water.*) Let us imagine God as water. God, the source of all, is an upwelling spring. Jesus, God incarnate, is the river that flows outward from this source. The Spirit is the irrigation channel where the water meets and moistens the earth.

ALL: All one flowing water.

LEADER 4: (*Passes the plant around the group.*) Let us imagine God as a flowering plant with a deep, invisible root, a green stem reaching into the world from that root, and a flower that spreads beauty, fragrance, and eventually seeds.

ALL: All one living plant.

LEADER: Father, mother, Son, lover, Spirit, creator—come along with us. Be in our company this day and this week and for all our lives.

ALL: Amen.

Bless each other in the name of the triune God to conclude your prayer.

CHARITY
JUSTICE

DO SOMETHING

Who needs encouragement in your parish? Kids in summer school or vacation bible school. Harried young moms and dads. Older folks who need help or occasional rides.