

Year B, 2018
Fr. Robert D. Arnold

Trinity Sunday
Isa 6:1-8; St. John 3:1-17

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

Niel deGrasse Tyson is an astrophysicist, Director of the Hayden Planetarium for the past 22 years, author and popular science communicator. He once said, “It was unthinkable not long ago that a biologist or paleontologist would be at the same conference as an astrophysicist. Now we have accumulated so much data in each of these branches of science as it relates to origins that we have learned that no one discipline can answer questions of origins alone.”¹ It would seem, by that quotation, that science today is coming to what biologist, naturalist and Harvard professor E. O. Wilson once call “consilience”. He described how we are beginning to see that all knowledge is intrinsically unified, and that behind the disciplines as diverse as physics, biology, anthropology, the arts, and even religion lies a small number of principles or natural laws that can be found in everything. It’s really quite a statement to make and, even more, a realization. Wilson grew up a Southern Baptist in Alabama who, as a young boy, was fascinated by the world of nature, then later of biology, then later of evolution. He never jettisoned his religious belief but, as he describes it, he preferred a search for objective reality over revelation and believed that pursuit was just another way of satisfying his religious hunger.

“It is an endeavor almost as old as civilization and intertwined with traditional religion, but it follows a very different course. . . . It aims to save the spirit, not by surrender but by liberation of the human mind.” He says, “It’s central tenet, as Einstein knew, is the unification of knowledge. When we have unified enough certain knowledge, we will understand who we are and why we are here.”²

Today is Trinity Sunday—a day that makes preachers wish they had paid better attention in seminary. It almost requires one to be a scientific theologian to understand the doctrine of the Trinity. Sadly, today, there is very little interest to do so. That was not always the case. In the first few centuries it was debated not simply by scholars in their ivory towers but by merchants in the market place. It was debated far and wide, in every place

1 https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/neil_degrasse_tyson_615090

2 *Consilience*, by E. O. Wilson, (Vintage Books, NY: 1998), p. 7.

there was a church. It was a hot button issue. Everybody wanted to understand the ineffable, the Great Mystery of who God is. And everybody had an opinion. The Scriptures didn't agree. Religions didn't agree. As far as I can recall there had only been three attempts at monotheism before Christianity and Christianity messed it all up by insisting that our One God was Three Persons while remaining One God. This was not God experienced in three ways, but One God who was Three. It even got the attention of Emperor Constantine, who had the brilliant idea that if he could get everyone together to hash out the points, he could settle the matter once and for all, bring peace to his quarreling bishops and unify his diverse empire. The summit was held in Nicaea and brought forth the Nicene Creed. To this day we confess that belief every Sunday.

You may remember that in Genesis God declared each act of creation “good.” After each act God looked on what He had done, “And God saw that it was good.” At the end of His creating, “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (1:31). There is only one thing that God decided is not good: “It is not good,” said God, “for the person to be alone.” Person-hood, Genesis is telling us, comes to fruition not in singularity, but in community. That is why the doctrine of the Trinity is so important—even God is a community of Three Persons who are still One. And we are made in God's image. Or, as Tyson has said, “We are part of this universe; we are in this universe, but perhaps more important than both of those facts, is that the universe is in us.”³

That probably doesn't clear up a thing! Fortunately the Greeks had a word to describe the Trinity—they almost always did, even back then. They called it *perichoresis*. That was the name for the dance that was a standard part of Greek theater—many moving as one. From the first Christian theologian, Tertullian, around the year 200 A.D. to the early Church Fathers, the relationship of this God-who-is-one-but-in-community was labeled and pictured as *perichoresis*. I know of no explanation that is better.

Have you ever looked in a microscope at a slide of cells? They're all moving, sometimes crazy-like; in reality they are dancing with a common purpose. Have you ever looked at the stars through a telescope? They look like they're stationary, but they're not. They're moving, always moving.

3 https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/neil_degrasse_tyson_531166

Everything is moving in relationship to everything around it. Everything is dancing. And that master choreography brings forth life and purpose.

We humans are not used to thinking in such a unified and harmonious way. Given our choice we prefer living our own way independent of everyone and everything else, and if something is in our way, or someone opposing our ideology, or blocking our singular path, we think nothing of removing or demolishing it, opposing, segregating, or destroying them.

I'm not qualified to be a dance critic, but to see many dancers dance as one is, in my opinion, amazing. To hear many different choristers singing different parts, yet sounding as one, is amazing. That's the way I think of God—the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit—and that is why we were created in God's image. So rather than think of the Christian enterprise as salvation from sin, death, and the devil, we might see it as our deliverance from the bondage of self and the liberation to see God in all things, God in each other, God in ourselves, and just how amazingly and wonderfully interconnected we are to all things in this universe. We just need to learn how to be better dancers! Amen.