

Three in One

Text: John 3:1-17

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May 30, 2021

Circle dance is a style of dance done in a circle or semicircle to musical accompaniment, such as rhythm instruments and singing. Circle dancing is probably the oldest known dance formation and was part of community life from when people first started to dance. Unlike line dancing, circle dancers are in physical contact with each other; the connection is made by hand-to-hand, finger-to-finger or hands-on-shoulders. Unlike partner dancing, it is a type of dance where anyone can join in without the need of one specific partner. Generally, the participants follow a leader around the dance floor while connecting with the dancers beside them. The dance can be gentle or energetic.



Dancing in a circle is an ancient tradition common to many cultures for marking special occasions, rituals, strengthening community and encouraging togetherness. The dance can also be enjoyed as an uplifting group experience or as part of meditation. Circle dances are choreographed to many different styles of music and rhythms. Modern circle dance mixes traditional folk dances, mainly from European or Near Eastern sources, with recently choreographed ones to a variety of music both ancient and modern. There is also a growing number of new circle dances to classical music and contemporary songs.¹

When I was a child, my family had a Christmas Eve tradition of gathering at my parent's house with aunts, uncles and cousins during which we would always sing Christmas carols. The person who had memorized all the lyrics to all of the carols was my Jewish aunt. She sang with great enthusiasm, and I loved it! At some point, in honor of her, we added to our Christmas Eve repertoire the Jewish folk song Hava Nagila. The singing of that song morphed into also doing a circle dance known as the horah. What great fun! It wasn't until years later that I recognized how special it was that the circle of our family was ever expanding.

Today is Trinity Sunday, when Christians contemplate this unique understanding of God as Holy One, Holy Three. The Trinity can be difficult to understand. God is always greater than we can conceive, so we dance with images and metaphors. All I hope to be able to do is circle around this mystery in such a way that invites all of us into the circle dance.

The text our Deacon, Becca, read from the Gospel according to John is one of the few places in Scripture when God Creator, God Savior and God Spirit are all present in the same passage. However, some scholars believe that the three visitors who appeared to Abraham and Sarah, as told in the story of Genesis 18, was perhaps a prefiguring of God as Trinity. I'd like to share an image with you.

¹ (Wikipedia n.d.)

This icon is traditionally entitled "The Hospitality of Abraham" and has also carried the name "The Trinity" as it does here.² It depicts the visit of three angels. Abraham was resting in the heat of the day, likely recovering from his recent covenant with God which resulted in the circumcision of all male members of his household. Upon the arrival of "The Lord," says the text, Abraham and Sarah immediately welcome their three guests, wash their feet, and provide them with fresh bread, meat, curds and milk. These mysterious guests confirm the covenantal promise that Sarah will bear a son, their descendants will be as numerous as the stars.



This passage, early in the long story of salvation, has long been interpreted as a visitation of three angels who are representatives of 'The Lord,' the Holy One of Israel. Christians, looking back at Scripture in light of their experience of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, have seen in this passage an indication of the Trinitarian nature of God. They interpret this passage as an ancient prefiguring of something made more clear much later. It is not that there are simply three visitors which creates this connection, but because of the hospitality given and received, a hospitality which gives us a window into God's very self.

Let's look a little more closely at the icon. Each figure is the same size; each figure holds a rod indicating shared authority. Each wear blue symbolizing divinity, though the central Christ figure

² (Gaultiere n.d.)

wears red as well, the color of humanity. These figures are without clear gender identity, and are distinct from one another, yet similar in appearance and demeanor.

This is the part which is extremely compelling to me: follow their gazes and the tilt of their heads. It forms a circle flowing from one to the other, symbolizing their unity of will but distinction of persons. It is an image of a divine dance, a movement of perpetual and reciprocal motion, where each person permeates the place and the space of the next. This feels a lot like a circle dance, such as the horah, which I described earlier. Each person is connected to the next, moving together in a circle which winds its way around the room. This vision of a dance is an ancient, though hardly exclusive, image of God in three persons, perfectly united in will, distinct and unique in persons, moving together in joyful love. And there's more.

If we were to take our finger and trace the spaces between the faces of each person in the image, the line between the figures on the left and right is no longer curved. It feels less like a circle and more like a triangle.

Let's take a look again. This time, imagine yourself in front of a life-size version of this icon, sitting at the table opposite the central figure and then trace the faces, including your own. When we do this, there is a full circle. It is complete.

This is not an accident. Icons were created to draw us in to what is going on there. I learned from reading *The Divine Dance*, a book co-authored by Mike Morrell and Richard Rohr, that it is believed that this particular icon once held a mirror affixed on the little rectangle below the bowl on the table³, which further emphasizes that our participation is required if the circle of this image is to be complete. The point of our participation is that we experience God as the Holy One, whose Trinitarian life together, a life which we see but hardly understand, is the way in which God is present to us, and the way in which we are drawn into relationship with the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit. We're in continuity with God. God's self-love includes love of us. There is reciprocity. There is infinite capacity to openness and love.

I think Richard Rohr captured this good news of God when he wrote, "Creation and Humanity have been drawn into the flow (the divine dance) – we're not outsiders or even simply spectators."⁴ It seems to me that God makes it so we're all invited, the circle is not closed. That is the beauty of circle dance: it is a dance of inclusion, it is a dance of connection, it is a dance without a limited number of participants.

There is much about a Trinitarian image of God which is life-giving and powerful. In particular, it highlights the importance of community and relationships. If God's own self is relational, then we also need to be attentive to our own relationship with God as well as our relationships with others, being especially attentive to community.

This is not always easy, especially in our culture which so highly values individualism and often has a scarcity mentality. I sincerely hope that a lesson we can take away from this pandemic is how much we really need one another; how important community is. A mantra that seemed to be ever-present over the last 15 months has been: "we're in this together."

I have become rather fond of a young woman (Megan) who, with the help of her parents, purchased a small local business just before the pandemic. The pandemic has been a difficult time for many businesses, and in particular small businesses in small towns have really struggled. Back in March when our daughter, Emma, was sick with COVID, I stopped in to make a couple

³ (Morrell 2016)

⁴ (Morrell 2016)

of purchases for a care package to be delivered to Emma in quarantine. I mentioned to Megan just how ill Emma was and how difficult swallowing had become. My young friend insisted on giving me some honey candies to ease Emma's sore throat, which worked well. A few days later I stopped in to purchase more! Megan has nurtured other relationships like the one I have shared with her, by showing generosity and caring, and (not surprisingly) it has come back to her.

Just this week I shopped at Megan's establishment and, as usual, we talked. She shared with me how grateful she is that her business has stayed alive. She expressed that she had not really understood the meaning of community until this pandemic. A smile spread across my face when Megan actually moved her finger in a circular motion and described how she recognizes that we need one another, and that we need community. She recognizes the circle dance of life and love and relationship. I thanked her for helping to write my sermon.

We are in a unique moment in time. Here at First Church, we can acknowledge that our circle widened during the pandemic. Our weekly YouTube channel views, on average, have been higher than our pre-pandemic weekly in-person attendance numbers. We have had a lot of traffic on our Facebook page.

Our circle has strengthened its connections. Our weekly Zoom coffee and conversation allowed for depth of conversation that simply did not happen during our in-person coffee hour. The relationships between phone friends has deepened as well.

The music to which we had become accustomed to dancing, changed so quickly. Out of necessity, we learned how to be church in ways we may not have previously imagined. It could be said that we changed the way we were dancing. Now, as we experience another transition, the music to which we are dancing is changing yet again. May we remember that God as Trinity shows us that the circle is only complete when the circle is open and all are invited into the divine dance.

References

Gaultiere, Bill. n.d. *soulshpherdng*. Accessed may 1, 2021. <https://www.soulshpherdng.org/enjoy-the-hospitality-of-the-trinity-with-rublevs-icon/>.

Morrell, Richard Rohr and Mike. 2016. *The Divine Dance* . New Kensington: Whitaker House.

n.d. *Wikipedia*. Accessed May 10, 2021. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Circle_dance.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Do you have any Memorial Day traditions?
2. Have any of the metaphors you've heard for the Trinity resonated with you?
3. Reflect on a time when you recognized you were part of the divine dance (you were moving with the flow of life) and/or when you resisted it.

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