

Sermon for Trinity
Sunday, June 4, 2023
“The Trinity is a relationship.”

Text: Matthew 28:16-20; Genesis 1:1 – 2:4a

I speak to you in the name of the one, triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.



Several years ago, I saw a comical image on a friend’s Facebook post. It shows God in a coffee shop. There is a sign on the counter that reads: “1 free coffee per person.” The barista is standing behind the counter with a puzzled look on his face and scratching his chin as God places his order: “So I guess I’ll take 3 free coffees!”

Nobody fully understands the Trinity. Comprehending the fullness of God as “triune” (three in one) is not an easy task. For many, especially those outside the Christian faith, it might seem like Christians believe in three gods or three separate entities, but the early councils of the Church wrestled with trying to define the Trinity within the limitations of both language and human understanding. While the Trinity is a defining marker by which we Christians find our identity, fully understanding the Trinity is a hard.

The Bible has attested to the three natures of God since the very beginning, from the time of creation itself, which we heard about in the first lesson today from Genesis. If we think of God the Father as the Creator of all that is—all that we see and don’t see—and God the Son as the incarnation of God who lived among humankind to help us better understand who God is, and God the Holy Spirit as the way we experience God in our individual, personal lives, then we realize that the Trinity is a relationship. Father in relationship to the Son in relationship to the Holy Spirit. The three natures of God as they relate to each other, all comprising the one God. This is captured in the image from the front of today’s bulletin. The last words of Jesus written by Matthew at the end of his gospel account name the Trinity: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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.” This directive is known as the Great Commission.

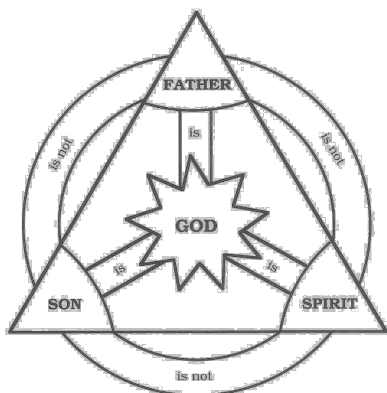


The difficulty of all this is in trying to wrap our heads around just *how* they are related. The earliest councils of the church from which we get the Nicene Creed tried to define it for us, but even back then, they wrestled with how to explain the Trinity. The Western (Catholic) Church teaches that the Son proceeds from the Father and the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son; the Eastern (Orthodox) Church teaches that the Son and the Spirit both proceed from the Father only. The great father and doctor of the Church, St. Augustine, said this:

“It is the Father only who is not of another. For the Son is born of the Father, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father. But the Father is neither born of, nor proceeds from another. And yet this should not occasion in human thought any idea of disparity in the supreme Trinity. For the Son is equal to him of whom he is born just as the Holy Spirit is equal to him from whom he proceeds.”

We are at a great disadvantage because of the limits of our language. We cannot fully describe the fullness of God with our limited language. We cannot talk about God as an “it” because God is not an “it,” and scripture as we have received describes the Trinity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In our modern-day attempts at inclusive language, you may have heard the Trinity referred to as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, naming the Trinity in terms of function. But, that isn’t adequate either, because it makes each nature of God dependent on the function. In other words, naming God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier makes God dependent on the created, the redeemed, and the sanctified; but, God is not dependent on anyone or anything. Nor does *that* fully capture the relationship. The Trinity is a relationship. Relationships are hard work. Knowing God is hard work and it takes a lifetime of nurturing the relationship to know God more deeply and more fully.

Let me call your attention to the following diagram. This is an ancient diagram that can help visualize this relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.



But our language still puts us at a disadvantage. When we call Father, Son, and Holy Spirit “persons,” our brains might visualize three individuals, like ones needing three cups of coffee as in the comic I described earlier, much like we think of each other as individual persons. But when it comes to the Trinity, that is not the case. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinctive natures of God, all of the same substance, but being visible to us in three distinctive ways. Maybe more like the image on the front cover of your bulletins. We see the work of the Father in everything that exists; we see the work of the Son in our reading of the Gospels—the

record of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, God's own self-revelation to the world; and, we see the work of the Holy Spirit who transforms and sanctifies the sacraments, and is present in our daily lives; yet, each observation we make is evidence of the one and only God at work. When any one nature acts, the others participate in that action, because God works as one; the three distinct natures of God always act as one. At the end of today's bulletin you will find the Athanasian Creed, which offers more ways to describe the Trinity. But, I think we mortals try too hard to explain the Trinity; our modern, analytic minds want a scientific explanation of what "God in three persons" really is. Ultimately, we must accept that the Trinity is a mystery. We cannot fully comprehend the Trinity, and we will not in this mortal life understand the fullness of God.

The Trinity is a relationship. God is about relationships, and we, having been created in the image of God, are created to be in relationship—relationship with God and relationship with each other. Relationships take hard work, but we can at least do the best we can. We are meant to be in community with each other. Sometimes we hurt each other, sometimes we are insensitive to each others' needs, sometimes we ignore each other, sometimes we hate each other, sometimes human beings commit evil acts against other human beings. But, we should always strive to be the best we can be. We should always strive to be the image of God, as we were created to be, living in relationship with each other to build each other up, to support each other, to share in our joys and our struggles, to remember each other in prayer, and to care for each other and the earth of which we were given charge.

The human race throughout the ages has always struggled in our relationships with each other. At the present time, we struggle in our relationships with each other in our daily lives. But, we are to be witnesses to the greatness and fullness of God whose very being is a relationship in itself and does not function without each other. We must be better people to each other. We must treat each other with love and respect, regardless of who it is, where they were born, where their ancestors came from, what they look like, what language they speak, what they do for a living, whom they choose as a significant other, the job they have, the amount of money they make—if any at all, or the choices they've made in life. We need each other. The human race needs each other, as much as we like to function as separate individuals. We must be witnesses that God loves each and every one of us, and that we can all have a deep relationship with God and with each other. That's exactly what Jesus meant by giving us the Great Commission. We must be visible signs of love in all that we do, in how we conduct our lives, in showing that we really believe all those things that Jesus taught us about loving our neighbor, respecting each other, and standing up for what we believe.

And the ways we do that can take many forms. Some folks may feel passionate to the point of speaking out, joining a peaceful protest in your neighborhoods or around the city, carrying a sign, or running for elective office. But if that's not your thing, simply

living from day-to-day in a way that demonstrates God's love through you in the way you relate to others. Teach and show your children that injustice, racism, and disrespect to others are unacceptable; they're watching how you behave. We can all find ways to speak out and tell the good news of Jesus Christ to all the nations.

We are the image of God who is a Trinity in relationship. The message of Trinity Sunday is that we need each other and we must do everything we can to nurture and deepen our relationships with each other. The community, the nation, and the world are crying for voices to be witnesses of the fullness of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God intends for us to know him more fully and will be with us to the end of the age, giving us all the tools we need to do the task before us. Building and maintaining good relationships takes hard work, and we must have the courage and the stamina to do the work. If we're willing to put in the hard work, our relationships will be deeper, stronger, and long-lasting.

I shall conclude with a quote I came across years ago. I must admit, I do not remember the source, but it has a lot to say to us.

“The Holy Trinity is about relationship and indwelling. It is about collaboration and the self-communication of God. The Trinity is about the mutuality of God within the God-head, about our invitation into the God-head by Jesus in the power of the *Paraclete*. And it is about our mutuality with each other, guiding, speaking, and declaring to one another the glory of God, Father/Creator, Jesus/Son, and Holy Spirit. The Trinity is our way of life made possible by God.”

Amen.