

“Three-In-One”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
Trinity Sunday
June 11, 2017

First Scripture Reading: John 1:1-5

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Second Scripture Reading: Matthew 28:16-20

¹⁶Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”



Sermon: “Three-In-One”

The moment I knew I needed to go to seminary was on a Sunday afternoon in 1994. I was a part-time youth minister at Pawley’s Island Presbyterian Church down in South Carolina. One of my youth, a bright sixth grader, caught in that awkward phase between not quite a teenager, and not quite a little kid anymore, asked me a question: “If we believe in God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, who am I supposed to pray to?”

I don’t remember exactly what I told him, but I remember *that* as the moment I realized if “I’m going to do this, I’ll need to be *much* better prepared than I am now.

That story came to mind this week as I prepared for today, which on the church calendar, is Trinity Sunday. You could be forgiven for not remembering. There are no cool traditions like hiding eggs or giving gifts for Trinity Sunday. There’s no color of the day. No one wears red for Trinity Sunday. We don’t even usually make that big of a deal about Trinity Sunday. Last year Michael Ludwig led worship on that day and talked about mission. Probably the reason most folks just skip over it is because it is one of, if not the only, festival day on the church calendar that celebrates not a historical event, or a person, but a doctrine. And it’s a doctrine that most people find difficult to understand anyway.

But today, we’re taking it head on. Today we talk about... The Trinity!

When we speak of God as a Trinity, we mean that the God we worship is a God of three persons: God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are all part of the same God. It is a doctrine that tries to balance the concept of having three parts, with still being one God. The three persons of the trinity are equal; none is above the other. All are the same, yet different. All have specific identities, but all are involved in the work of the others. As a doctrine of the church, the trinity asks us to accept the mathematical equation $1 + 1 + 1 = 1$. Small wonder we find it confusing and difficult to explain.

For starters, the doctrine of the Trinity is not laid out anywhere in the Bible. Yes, Matthew uses the “Father, Son, & Holy Spirit” formula in the passage we just read and Paul uses it as well.¹ We baptize in the name of the Father, Son, & Holy Spirit. We wed people, declare forgiveness, celebrate communion, and give the benediction with that same Trinitarian formula. But nowhere in Scripture do we find an explanation for God that defines God, or limits God (for that matter) to the three persons of the trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This doctrine of the trinity, while it certainly draws from scripture, is completely a product of the early church as the early Christians struggled with the particulars of what they believed.

In the Bible, they found a God who is the creator of all that is and who reached out to the nation of Israel, to claim them, free them from captivity, and establish them as a nation. From before the beginning of time God was and is. God is eternal. God makes and controls, and all things operate and function according to God’s will.

But these early Christians also understood that Jesus is God’s son. Jesus was born into the world as a human being. He lived and taught and stood as an example of all that God desires of humanity. Jesus was persecuted and died on the cross. On the third day he was resurrected and through him we are redeemed and saved.

They also believed that after Jesus ascended into Heaven, the Holy Spirit descended at Pentecost and that Spirit from God, lives and moves all around us and empowers the life and ministry of the church.

These basic understandings remain common consent among Christians around the world. But the early church faced criticism that they were in actuality worshipping three Gods. Yet the Jewish roots of the faith affirmed that there is but one God.² How can the church hold to the truth of one God, and yet affirm the importance of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The doctrine of the trinity grew out of that question, and the church’s attempts to reconcile the “three-ness” of God with the “oneness” of God.

Now the Bible is very clear in teaching that God alone is God and there are no others. The first of the Ten Commandments is “You shall have no other gods before me.”³ The prophet Isaiah speaks with the voice of God saying, “Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me.”⁴ There is but one God; that is foundational.

Yet in practice, we tend to speak and act as if there were three. We often speak of God as the creator and ruler of the universe, but see Jesus as a sort of deputy; the good Cop in a cosmic game of Good Cop – Bad Cop. The Holy Spirit is something else entirely, something frightening and mysterious that you’re better off going to a Baptist or Pentecostal church to find.

And so, we tend to think of the Trinity as a corporate organizational chart, with God the Father as CEO up at the top, and the Son and Holy Spirit as subordinate officers below. If you ever saw the movie *Bruce*

¹ See 2nd Corinthians 13:14, NRSV

² Deuteronomy 6:4, NRSV

³ Exodus 20:3, NRSV

⁴ Isaiah 43:10, NRSV

Almighty,⁵ Morgan Freeman plays this kind of corporate God in three different roles: as the boss, the janitor and the electrician.

Yet scripture refers to all three as divine. So, all three must somehow be God, yet not separate Gods. They must all be one, but how? And *that's* how you get the doctrine of the Trinity.

Now, we have the advantage today, of a fully fleshed-out belief system - for the most part. There are answers to most questions, even if you don't like them that much. But back in the early days of the second and third centuries, things weren't as cut and dried, doctrine-wise. It was a sort of "theological wild west" where there were lots of ideas being openly discussed and debated in the market place, and many of them eventually labeled heretical.

One of the deepest early debates was over the relationship between God the Father, and Jesus the son of God. Some argued they were the same; that for as long as there had been a God, there had been a Jesus. Others believed Jesus was a later creation of God. Questions arose about the nature of Jesus' humanity. How human was he? How divine? How did that mix work? Not only did learned theologians and church officials openly debate these topics, they fought over them sometimes.

In 325 AD, Emperor Constantine called a Council at the city of Nicaea in what is now Turkey, to debate and attempt to discern an answer to these questions. It's worth pointing out, that Constantine was no great fan of theology, he just wanted his new national religion to be unified.

The question is an interesting one if you think about it. How *do* humanity and divinity mix in the life of Jesus? My Church History professor, Dr. Isabel Wood Rogers, taught us that the theories of the relationship between the Father and the Son could be understood using chocolate.

Some argued that Jesus was like an M&M: Entirely God, but with a thin veneer of Human candy coating. Almost all God, with just a little humanity on the outside. (So the divinity melts in your mouth, not in your hand.)

Others argued that Jesus was more like a chocolate chip cookie: a human cookie with bits of chocolate God scattered inside. Human, but with the ability to tap into God's power and wisdom when the time called for it.

But it was also possible, that this mix was more like chocolate pudding with the Chocolate of the divine God and the Milk of humanity so intermingled that they are indistinguishable and inseparable. Both are still present but you can't take them apart.

This is essentially where the Nicene Council came out. About a hundred years later, another Council at Chalcedon gave us the definition we typically use today: Jesus was "Truly God and Truly Man."

Eventually, the Bishops who met at Nicaea settled on a doctrine that is expressed in what we now call the Nicene Creed which "made very clear that the One who became incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth was no

⁵ *Bruce Almighty*. Dir. Tom Shadyac. Perf. Jim Carrey, Jennifer Anniston, Morgan Freeman. Spyglass Entertainment/Universal Pictures, 2003. DVD.

creature, no lesser divinity. Rather he is ‘God of God,’ ‘Light of Light,’ ‘of the same substance as the Father.’”⁶

And because they still had a little time left before lunch, the council went on to declare that the Holy Spirit “Proceeds from the Father [and the Son], who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified...”⁷

And so, what we have is a doctrine that affirms Father, Son and Holy Spirit as three persons of God, but still only one God. The “what” of that sentence is easy to say. The “how” is a little trickier to explain.

Some thinkers tried to express the Trinity in terms of God’s presence and activity in different forms at different times. Sometimes I hear people try to explain the Trinity as being like water: it is at some points liquid, solid or gas, but all three states are still chemically the same. This is how some ancient thinkers tried to understand God as well. God was the creator and God of Israel. Then God came to earth in the life of Jesus. Then after ascending back to heaven, God re-entered the world as the Holy Spirit.

The problem here is that the book of Genesis tells us that the Spirit of God moved over the face of the waters just prior to creation.⁸ And the John passage we read this morning affirms that Jesus, the Logos, or Word of God – is and always has been – with, and in God. “The word was *with* God and the word *was* God.”⁹

In speaking about the relationship between Father and Son, Colossians 2:9 says of Jesus, “In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.” Jesus Himself says in John 14:9, “Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father.” Yet Jesus prays to God the Father but He also says that He is sent by the Father “To do the will of Him who sent Me and to complete His work.”¹⁰

The doctrine of the Trinity is clunky at times. It’s hard to picture. As a kid, I used to wonder who was answering prayers and running the universe while God was down in Palestine teaching and healing as Jesus. And to be fair, the Church hasn’t really done a great job of explaining this idea of a trinitarian God either. The church has actually done a better job of saying what the Trinity is not.

Theologian Shirley Guthrie writes,

“If we want to translate the ancient doctrine of the trinity into language that is meaningful to us, we could say something like this: ‘One God in three persons’ means one personal God who lives and works in three different ways at the same time.”¹¹

But here is the key thing: “the Doctrine of the Trinity does not try to explain the mystery of the Triune God; it tries to preserve a mystery that cannot be explained. What is ... important is not that we comprehend the mystery itself but that we see how the doctrine of the Trinity functions in Christian thinking about who God is and what God [does].”¹²

⁶ “Introduction to the Nicene Creed.” *Book of Confessions: Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): Study Edition*. Louisville: Geneva, 1999. 4. Print.

⁷ Nicene Creed, 1.3

⁸ Genesis 1:2, NRSV

⁹ John 1:1

¹⁰ John 4:34, NRSV

¹¹ Guthrie, Shirley. *Christian Doctrine*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994. 84. Print.

¹² Guthrie, Shirley. *Christian Doctrine*. 84

First, let's look at what God does. It is easy to separate the works of the three persons of the Trinity. God is creator. Jesus is Redeemer. The Holy Spirit sanctifies. But by splitting the work in that way, we fall into a common trap.

Such a construct makes it easy to see God as the angry king who wants to punish us for breaking the rules and Jesus as the selfless one who takes that punishment on himself so that God had to let us go free. Being a Christian this way is only about having "a personal relationship with Jesus." But the doctrine of the trinity shows us that the work of one is the work of all. The two are not opposed to one another. The will and action of the Father is the will and action of the Son. Christ is not in opposition to God's will, Christ is the deepest expression of that will. "If Jesus is the friend of Sinners, then so is God."¹³

There are many people who tell me they don't like hearing what they call "politics" from the pulpit. Being a Christian is about Spiritual things. The Holy Spirit fills us and guides us and the life of the Christian is about prayer and contemplation and drawing closer to God. The Spirit helps us to rise above worldly concerns, like poverty and injustice to find comfort and peace in lives devoted to a deeper spirituality in our personal walk with God.

But the will and action of the Spirit are the will and action of the Father and the Son who are Creator and Redeemer of this world and the people in it. Therefore, the Spirit doesn't help us escape from the concerns and the work of this world. The Spirit empowers us and emboldens us to face them.

The Doctrine of the Trinity holds us to the truth that the work of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit cannot be separated or held in opposition to one another.

The Doctrine of the Trinity also influences how we understand *who* God is, and who *we* are. As I said earlier, we tend to see the Trinity as a pyramid with God at the top. But if we see God in this hierarchical way what does that mean for us to be created in the image of God?

"If God's freedom is freedom to do anything 'he' pleases, and freedom from responsibility for anything or anyone outside 'himself,' then that is what the freedom, and authority, and power of human beings made in the image of God looks like."¹⁴

But, what if that's not an accurate picture of God? In the Eastern Orthodox Church, they understand the trinity more like a circle. "John of Damascus, a Greek theologian who lived in the seventh century, developed this understanding of the Trinity with a concept called Perichoresis ... Peri means 'around.' Choresis means literally 'dancing.' Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are like three dancers holding hands, dancing around together in harmonious, joyful freedom."¹⁵

If the deity of God is fulfilled in the community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and we are created in God's image, then the true humanity of human beings ... is only realized in community with others. When we see the Trinity as a community of equals, we can no longer be able to see ourselves as mere individuals walking around on our own – not if we are created in the image of God.¹⁶

¹³ Guthrie, Shirley. *Christian Doctrine*. 87

¹⁴ Guthrie, Shirley. *Christian Doctrine*. 90

¹⁵ Guthrie, Shirley. *Christian Doctrine*. 91

¹⁶ Guthrie, Shirley. *Christian Doctrine*. 93-94

And maybe that's where so many of our problems originate: we hear the Bible say "we" are created in the image of God and we think "I" look like God. But, in actuality, when humanity is created in God's image, the whole thing looks like God, all of it, all of us, together. It's like looking at your high school class picture. We are used to seeing 182 images of God. But maybe there's only one.

The problem with thinking of God in Trinitarian terms is that we inevitably emphasize the One at the expense of the Three or the Three at the expense of the One. But the bottom line is that even though we come to know some of who God is and what God is like through the witness of those who have experienced God, God is still beyond our ability to fully comprehend. Like most doctrines of the church, the Trinity is not unassailable fact, it is a human answer to a question beyond our understanding.

In the final analysis, "the Trinity is a mystery to be confessed, not a mathematical problem to be solved."¹⁷

Oh, and in case you're wondering how I would answer that kid today, I would tell him that we pray to God, in the name of Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

To our Triune God be all Glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

¹⁷ Guthrie, Shirley. *Christian Doctrine*. 95