

Tom Coop
Matthew 28:16-20
June 11, 2017

The Divine Dance

Welcome, on this **Trinity** Sunday, 2017. Tomorrow, you can start taking down all the decorations that you put up for this special day in the church year.

You did put up decorations, didn't you?

I know the children have been counting down the days in joyful anticipation of this day.

I can just hear them now, "Mommy, how many days is it til **Trinity** Sunday?"

It is an exciting time. I hope each of you got what you wanted for **Trinity** Sunday.

Of course, this is the last day we will sing all the **Trinity** carols that we have been enjoying for the past month.

You want to know, "Why we can't we keep the **Trinity** spirit all year long?" don't you? (PAUSE)

Oh, you didn't give **Trinity** presents this year? You didn't decorate your home?

What do you mean, you didn't even know it was **Trinity** Sunday until you looked at the bulletin this morning? (PAUSE)

Ok, I guess I'll have to accept the fact that **Trinity** Sunday isn't a very big event in the average Christian's life.

But, did you know that **Trinity** Sunday isn't much fun for preachers, either?

Each year, on the first Sunday after Pentecost, we are given the task of explaining the unexplainable God, in three persons, blessed **Trinity**... as the hymn we just sang puts it.

So, if that's true, let me ask you, how is God three and one at the same time? And, if they are, who do we pray to? Can we pray to Jesus, as well as the Father? How about the Holy Spirit?

And, if we can, how is it that Jesus is less than the Father in terms of his status? If not, why did Jesus say, "The Father is greater than I am?" Or is he?

God is one and God is three. God is here and God is everywhere. God is spirit and God took on flesh.

Saying that there are three persons in the Godhead leads some people to think that there are three gods who just work in partnership.

But that's called Tri-theism (three gods) or Polytheism (many gods), as opposed to monotheism, one god. (PAUSE)

I could go on and on...

Bottom line: the doctrine of the **Trinity** is a riddle to most people.

Additionally, at fairly regular intervals in the history of the church, someone has pointed out in a book, or a sermon, or a private argument, that the word "**Trinity**" is never even mentioned in the Bible.

And that's true. But, neither does the Bible contain the words "sacrament," "Christmas," or the expression "personal savior."

Still, those who make this point about the **T**rinity, usually go on to state that the doctrine of the **T**rinity was something theologians dreamed up just a century or so ago.

But, the controversy over the validity of the **T**rinity is not a modern-day invention.

From the very inception of the thought that God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are three manifestations of the same God, the debate began to rage.

One early scholar of the 16th century, Michael Servetus, did an exhaustive study of Scripture, the result of which was, according to Servetus, conclusive proof that there was no biblical basis for the doctrine of the **T**rinity.

The reward for all his hard work and research? To be burned at the stake for heresy.

Thank goodness we don't burn one another at the stake any more over theological disagreements. Or I would have burned long ago.

Instead, we have found other ways of dealing with those whose ideas about God do not coincide with ours.

We simply treat them as outcasts and proclaim to anyone who will listen, that this person could not possibly be a Christian, unless, they believe everything WE believe about God, exactly as we tell them to.

Not here though. Not in this house!

St. Augustine, one of the most astute thinkers the Christian Church has ever produced, was walking along the seashore one day while pondering the doctrine of the **Trinity**: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

He says he heard a voice saying, "Pick up one of the large sea shells there by the shore." So, he picked it up.

Then the voice said, "Now pour the ocean into the shell."

And he replied, "Lord, I can't do that."

And the voice answered, "Of course not. In the same way, how can your small, finite mind ever hold and understand the mystery of the eternal, infinite, triune God?"

Point made.

Hey, if St. Augustine couldn't get it, how are we supposed to make sense of the whole thing?

If I had to adequately explain the **Trinity** to a five-year-old, or even to a fifty-year-old, for that matter, I would be in big trouble. Luckily, I think DeLynn is explaining it to the five-year old's in Sunday School. 😊

How can you pour the ocean into a mere seashell? How do you explain the grandeur of God to minds as limited as ours?

The **Trinity**, my friends, indeed is a mystery. The best we can do is use metaphors to try to explain it.

A number of illustrations have been suggested. They all can be useful, as long as you remember they are only illustrations.

Take water. It can exist as solid, liquid, or steam. But it is still water.

Or an egg. An egg is made up of a shell, the egg white, and the yolk. All three are needed for an egg to be complete. Still an egg.

One of my favorites comes from the book and later a movie, called *The Shack*.

The story is compelling, but I especially liked the way that the author, William Paul Young, represented the **T**rinity.

For God the Father, Young portrayed God as a large black woman, who was outgoing, warm-hearted, and kind.

For God the Holy Spirit, the persona was that of an Asian woman dressed in bright colors who seemed to dart in and out of sight in a Tinkerbell-like fashion.

And for Jesus, the author pretty much stayed with the stereotype of Jesus as a workman, complete with jeans, flannel shirt, and toolbelt.

Each of these personas of God exhibited unique characteristics, and each had a specific role to play in the fictional story.

If you haven't read the book or seen the movie, I highly recommend it!

If you really want an explanation of the **T**rinity, maybe one of the best ones comes from the great mind of C. S. Lewis who undertook that task in his book *Mere Christianity* seventy years ago.

He writes, "An ordinary simple Christian kneels down to say his prayers. He is trying to get into touch with God (Father).

"But if he is a Christian, he knows that what is prompting him to pray is also God: God, so to speak, inside him (Holy Spirit).

"But, he also knows that all real knowledge of God comes through Christ, the Man who was God; that Christ, is standing beside him, helping him to pray, praying for him.

"You see what is happening," says Lewis. "God the Father is the thing to which he is praying, the goal he is trying to reach.

"God the Spirit is also the thing inside him, which is pushing him on - the motive power.

"God the Son is also the road or bridge along which he is being pushed to that goal.

"The whole threefold life of the three-person Being is actually going on in that ordinary act of prayer."

That's as good an explanation of the **Trinity** as you and I are apt to get and it is still too complicated for most of us.

It's important to remember, though, that any illustration fails eventually.

Their purpose isn't to "prove" the **Trinity**, they simply help us understand the concept.

And while the doctrine of the **T**rinity does not attempt to prove God, it does explain to us, in a very elemental way, what God has revealed to us about himself so far.

To describe the tip of the iceberg above the water is not to describe the entire iceberg.

So, we affirm the **T**rinity, not as a complete explanation of God, but simply as a way of describing what we know about Him.

The **T**rinity teaches us that God is beyond all human comprehension. After all, if we could explain God, he wouldn't be God.

If you feel baffled by the **T**rinity, join the crowd. The greatest minds of history have stood in amazement before a God so great that he cannot be contained by our puny explanations.

All of this confusion, of course, leads to errors. One is the *Holy Spirit Error*.

Several modern movements emphasize the work of the Holy Spirit, to the exclusion of the other two.

These movements focus on the filling of the Holy Spirit. But too much or exclusive emphasis on the Holy Spirit is dangerous and creates a lopsided form of Christianity.

And while the spirit brings to our minds and hearts what we need to know – it's always pointing towards Jesus.

Another problem is when the focus is solely on Jesus, only this time with God the Father and the Holy Spirit being basically ignored.

It's a "Me and Jesus" thing.

But, believe it or not, Christianity is not just about Jesus. It's not just about a personal savior.

When people came to Jesus, he pointed them away from himself, to the Father. Just as the Spirit points away from itself, to the Son.

Ok, I've talked about the errors of Spirit-Only and Jesus-Only Christianity. Of course, on **Trinity** Sunday there has to be a third error.

This time, it's a faith focused only on God, or more exactly, God as Father.

In this situation, or way of thinking, faith becomes obsessively male.

Those churches and denominations who refuse to ordain women, or don't allow women to hold offices of leadership in the church, do so from this vantage point.

God is Father (read - male) so it follows that all Christian leaders should be male. And my wife should obey me because I am the Father in the home.

I don't think I have to say much about how wrong-headed that kind of theology is.

So, all that is to say, that without the **Trinity**, we can end up worshipping a one-dimensional God, an idol, not the triune God that has been revealed to us.

The reality of God as **Trinity** is really and truly all about this ... God loves us ... God loves us.

Actually, this is the basic truth of God: God's love for you and for me. It is the central and primary theme of Holy Scripture. It is the heart and soul of the Gospel itself. "For God so loved..." right?

The ancient belief of God as **Trinity** is most importantly a belief about the love of God.

Indeed, that God loves us enough to be the Creator who created the whole universe and every creature. The God who has created you and me and given us the very breath of life.

It is the belief and experience that God loves us enough to be the Redeemer who has saved and redeemed the world from sin, sorrow, and separation, so that we might be joined to that love forever.

And, it is the belief and experience that God loves us enough to be the Spirit/Guiding God who is at work in us inspiring, strengthening, guiding, advocating, and illuminating us in our living.

There was a couple in our church who related their family's Sunday morning experience of a sermon that I had preached.

They had gone home and during Sunday lunch were talking about my sermon. (something that warms the heart of every pastor to be sure.)

In the midst of their conversation, their second-grade daughter, sitting at the table, chimed in.

“Oh, Pastor Tom’s sermons, they’re always the same. You know...blah, blah, blah ... love.”

Well I was amused and thought to myself, “Hey, this little girl really got it ... the message, the repetition, the core, the redundancy.”

Ok, that didn’t really happen ... but it could of.

And that’s the way it is with the **Holy Trinity** ... the message, the repetition, the core, the redundancy.

Over and over again: “Blah, blah, blah, love...”

God the Creator. I love you and give you life.

God the Redeemer. I love you and embrace you in that love forever.

God the Spirit. I love you and warm your heart and your soul with my love.

Blah, blah, blah, love ... I welcome you to that love. I enfold you in that love. I hold you forever and ever in that love.

And for our part, we are called to believe it. We are called to proclaim it. We are called to invite people into it. We are called to embrace and be embraced by it.

So, the next time someone asks you to explain the **Trinity** to them, remember the following story, as related by Desmond Tutu, in his book, *Hope and Suffering*.

A simple Russian country priest was confronted by an eminent scientist.

This chap trotted out apparently devastating arguments against the existence of God and declared, "I don't believe in God."

The unlettered priest retorted quickly, "Oh, it doesn't matter - God believes in you." And I would add God loves you!

And that's what it all boils down to: God believes in us all, and loves us all, whether we understand the **T**rinity or not.

He is here, and He is available. If we have a need, He is our Provider. If we are heartbroken, He is our encourager.

If we have wandered far from the path of righteousness, He is our Savior. Everything we ever need, we can find in Him.

And whether He is God the Father, God the Son, or God the Spirit – He loves us ... to the moon and back!

God in three persons. Blessed **T**rinity.

Amen!