

Galatians 4:1 My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; ² but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. ³ So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world. ⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. ⁶ And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" ⁷ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

We Believe: The Trinity

Galatians 4:1-7

In case anyone needs a reminder, next Sunday is Father's Day. We stand here between Mother's Day and Father's Day, and it is good to remember that there are only two requirements one must meet in order to be a father or mother. Fathers must be male, mothers must be female, and you must have children. You don't have to be a good father, a generous mother, a patient or loving parent. You just have to have a child. In fact, your identity as a father or mother relies not on yourself, but on your children. No kids, no parents. Don't you hate it when your kids have that much power?! But they do – they define you as a father or a mother. And when you think about it, almost all of the ways we define and identify ourselves is by our relationships with other people, especially family. What's your last name? It either comes from your family of origin or from the family you married into.

It all goes to emphasize the point that we are social animals. That doesn't just mean that we tend to gravitate toward others; it goes much deeper than that – we understand ourselves, identify ourselves in relationship to individuals and groups outside of ourselves. My wife gives me my identity as a husband; my kids give me my identity as a father; my parents make me a son, and my sisters make me a brother. I was born in Florida, so I share a kinship with others born in the Sunshine State. My parents are both originally from Ohio, so that makes me, as the saying goes, "a Yankee by birth, and a Southerner by the grace of God."

All of these identities have to do with my connection to, and relationship with others. I am no one if I do not have relationships with others. And one of the most interesting things to me about our Christian understanding of God is that God is the same way. We call it the "social theory of the Trinity" and it has been around since the early church theologians, but folks are paying more attention to it these days.

The social theory of the Trinity focuses on the fact that each of the three persons of the Trinity has their identity defined by the other two. The Father is the Father only because of the Son; and the Son is only understood as the Son because of his relationship with the Father. If there wasn't a Father, there wouldn't be a Son, and if there wasn't a Son, there wouldn't be a Father. And the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. If there weren't Father and Son, there would be no Holy Spirit.

This understanding of God in our Christian faith is a unique feature of Christianity. No other religion has it. We are monotheists – there is only one God – but this God is three persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit, so there is a community of love within God's own self. In his famous book, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis explains the idea like this:

All sorts of people are fond of repeating the Christian statement that 'God is love'. But they seem not to notice that the words 'God is love' have no real meaning unless God contains at least two Persons. Love is something that one person has for another person. If God was a single person, then before the world was made, He was not love.¹

Cynthia Rigby puts it this way: *Trinitarian faith does not first [say that God exists] and then [say] that...God loves. Rather, it recognizes that God loves and relates because God is loving and related. God's loving and relating are not only something*

God does but also who God really is.²

So, the essence of who God is is seen in our belief in the Trinity, the Three-in-One God. God isn't just love because that's what God is like, God is love because it is in God's very essence to love as the Father loves the Son; the Son loves the Father; and the Spirit is that same love moving like a breeze through both the spirit and physical worlds.

And here's one of the most amazing characteristics of this perfect, divine love; while it is shared perfectly and fully among the three equal persons of the godhead, it is also always opening up to include others in its circle. God's love never stays within the Trinity. That love is always reaching out and bringing others into it. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit never form a clique where others do not feel welcome. In fact, the opposite is true: the love shared within the community of this triune God is always flowing over the banks and flooding into the lives of the world. When God first called Abraham to enter

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952; Harper Collins: 2001) p. 174.

² Cynthia Rigby, "Scandalous Presence: Incarnation and Trinity" in *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics*, Pau & Jones, Eds. 2006, Kindle Locations 1156-1157. Kindle Edition.

into a covenant relationship, this was an outpouring of God's love, wishing to include not only Abraham and his descendants. God is clear in saying to Abraham that the covenant being formed is one that is intended to bless the nations, all people, and that all people would be drawn to God through the generations of Abraham's family. God isn't being exclusive with the Jews; in fact, this covenant with Abraham is the first step in God's reaching out to the entire world.

God's loving relatedness within the Trinity means that God seeks to be related in love to the world. The circle of love between Father, Son and Spirit is porous, always including others, welcoming others, inviting others into that circle. And we embody God's love when our circles of love are just as permeable, open, and inviting. When our circles are closed, or only open to those who are like us, then we are not showing our identities as the children of this loving family.

One of the things the Pharisees and scribes criticized Jesus the most for was his irritating insistence on opening circles that were supposed to stay closed. He talked to women he did not know, like the Samaritan woman at the well who had had eight husbands. This is a big violation of social convention even to this day in the many parts of the Middle East. He invited himself to have dinner at the home of Zacchaeus, the low life tax collector who had sold out his fellow Israelites and was working for Rome. We would call him a traitor, but Jesus called him friend. Jesus healed the child of a Roman soldier; he touched untouchable lepers; he constantly kept opening the circle to let in everyone who wanted to come in. Where did he learn that? From his heavenly Father, of course.

In Paul's letter to the Galatians, he tells us that this triune God's love is so great that even we have been included, and not just included, but adopted into the family.

...[W]hen the fullness of time had come, Paul says, *God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.* Then Paul says one of the most amazing things: *And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"*

All three persons of the Trinity together wanted us humans to be included in the circle of their love, so, the Father sent the Son, whose atoning sacrifice broke down the barriers, and then the Son asked the Father to send the Spirit which enters our hearts and elevates us into the circle by empowering us and freeing us to call the God of galaxies, "Abba, Father." And, as you know, Abba is the form of the word "father" young children would say, like "Daddy" or "Papa." We are no longer followers of Jesus, we are his sisters and brothers because his Father has adopted us, and the Spirit has entered our hearts and freed us to call the infinite God, "Father. Dad. Daddy." The entire Trinity is involved in welcoming us into the family by adopting as children and giving us the ability, the privilege, the inconceivable invitation to call God, "Abba, Father."

And so the circle grows larger, the circle that begins with the Three-in-One who are the same substance, equals, who seek not to lord it over creation, but to welcome creation into a fellowship of humble love, servanthood, and mutual submission to one another. Because we believe in the Trinity, and because we have been welcomed into the fellowship of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we should find within us the same great desire to welcome others into the fellowship that welcomed us. And it doesn't matter who they are; it doesn't matter what they've done; it doesn't matter where they live; it doesn't matter what language they speak.

Our God is love, and when we experience the love that includes us in the fellowship of the Trinity, we can only want to reach out to those who seem most lost, most excluded, most un-loved, and invite them in. Because that is now who we are, as well. This is now our identity: the adopted children of the heavenly Father; the adopted brothers and sisters of the Son; those in whom the Spirit now dwells, transforming us into people who want to open their arms and their hearts to invite and welcome others into the circle, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.