

"3-D Christianity: Who God Is"

John 16:12-15

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When I was very young, around four or five years old, I started getting cross-eyed. For a time, I wore an eye patch to try to make the weaker eye work harder and get stronger. I looked like a little pirate! Eventually, I had to have corrective eye surgery and it was successful. I also did exercises to strengthen my eyes. One was to use a stereoscope. That's a device that you put pictures on and look through lenses to make the images appear three-dimensional.

People use "3D" images in lots of ways: from those old stereoscopes to View Master toys to the red and blue cardboard glasses used to watch some movies to 3D printers to smartphone apps to gaming systems. 3D can be more vivid and allows us to see depth instead of flat images.

What if we could see and experience our faith and Christian living more vividly? Sometimes our spirituality can seem flat, dull, blurry. But God has so much more for us. We need the right perception to grasp the depth and vitality of life in Christ.

During COVID stay-at-home and my illness this year, I did quite a bit of reading. There were early days I didn't feel like doing much at all. But I've read some novels and some Bible studies and theology. One book I got is *Christianity in 3D* by Larry Hart. He teaches at the ORU School of Theology. When I was in college, he was the university chaplain for three years and then I had him as a professor. His book offers a helpful approach to Christian faith and life. It's a good intro to the vividness and depth of God and our life with God. So I thought a sermon series based on it would be good to do. Hart has nine chapters in the book—three on each of three topics. But I'm condensing it to three sermons. We'll look at who God is, what God does in us, and what God does through us.

Hart tells about sampling 3D television at the electronics store. Walking toward the enormous flat-screen TV, he saw how blurry the picture was. There were pairs of glasses near some conveniently placed theater chairs, so he took a seat and put on a pair of the glasses. The image was

still blurred. The sales person told him he had to turn on the glasses. When he did, he was amazed at the whole new world of TV that leaped off the screen. He went home and told his wife they simply had to keep up with the latest technology to be effective Christians in the twenty-first century. His wife, with her strong sense of realism and financial responsibility, begged to differ. He acknowledged her wisdom. But, he says, this taught him a lesson about 3D Christianity: You have to have the right glasses.

What are the glasses we need for deep and vivid Christian life? Some teachers call the Bible the "spectacles" that enable us to see and appreciate what God makes known. And, we know God's written word in Scripture and God's Incarnate Word, Jesus, with the help of the Holy Spirit. At the same time, we need each other to know and experience God's Word and Spirit (Hart 7-8).

So in this series we'll look at the Scriptures, asking the Holy Spirit to enlighten us together to see better some of who God is and what God does.

Now, to see who God is we'd need to look at the whole Bible. We'd also learn a lot from Christian tradition. But let's focus on one aspect of what God makes known about himself and how that relates to us. Since we're talking about three-dimensional faith and life, we'll look at the Trinity, the teaching that God is both three and one.

Don't tune out. A pastor friend of mine one time told me he was preaching about love and used the communion and love of the Trinity as an example. As soon as he said, "Trinity," his people's eyes glazed over. But hang in there and we'll see how vital and life-giving the Trinity is.

We talk about the Trinity because that's the Christian way of talking about the God who saves us through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. The doctrine of the Trinity is a way of talking about who God is and what God does to save us and make us all that God wants us to be. Talking about the Trinity is an attempt to express basic Christian faith, to tell the story of God and us. In Jesus Christ, the awesome and invisible God saves us from sin and death. By the power of the Holy Spirit, God continues to be totally present to us, seeking everlasting communion with everyone and

everything God has made (Catherine Mowry LaCugna, "The Practical Trinity." In Kenneth Collins, *Exploring Christian Spirituality* 274, 276).

This kind of stuff kind of stretches our brains. We can feel like we've been thrown in the deep end of the pool. But we need it. We're called to love God with all our heart, soul, and *mind*.

I told you a few weeks ago that Jimmy Buskirk had died. He was one of my ministry mentors. His memorial service was at Tulsa First UMC this past week. I watched it online and it was moving and meaningful. Reflecting on his life and ministry was a great witness. One of the things he taught us is that we can be alive and dynamic spiritually and still think. He talked about the Holy Spirit watering people's minds. I remember him saying that preaching needs to have content. Too many sermons are like angel food cake: you can squeeze them down into about one good bite—most of it's fluff! I try not to overwhelm, but I want to give you something to chew on and that will nourish you in your life with God.

With that in mind, let's put on our 3D glasses or look through the stereoscope and see something about who the Holy Trinity is and how we interact with this amazing God. I want you to be captured by the beauty of God. I want us to be taken with God's wonder and splendor.

One way that Christian thinkers have tried to capture some of the meaning of the Trinity is to describe it as a divine dance. Sometimes in grade school or at church camp we had to do "folk dancing." We would line up and get a partner. Usually, the dance involved moving quickly down the middle between two lines of people, barely touching the hand of our partner.

The church where I was an associate pastor years ago hosted a square dance club. Nancy and I went once. It was a lot of work. Knowing where to stand, when and where to move, listening to the caller give instructions and following them without stumbling was a challenge.

How does a dance describe the Trinity? Here's how one writer uses this image:

Imagine a folk dance, a round dance, with three partners in each set. The music starts up and the partners holding hands begin moving in

a circle. On signal from the caller, they release hands, change partners, and weave in and out, swinging first one and then the other. The tempo increases, the partners move more swiftly with and between and among one another, swinging and twirling, embracing and releasing, holding on and letting go. But there is no confusion, every movement is cleanly coordinated in precise rhythms (these are practiced and skilled dancers!), as each person maintains his or her own identity. To the onlooker, the movements are so swift it is impossible at times to distinguish one person from another; the steps are so intricate that it is difficult to anticipate the configurations as they appear. (Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* 44-45)

God reveals himself as one God who exists in community. The essence of God's nature is relationship, communion, love. Love eternally pours from the Father to the Son and from the Son to the Father in the Spirit. We're created in the image of God. Part of what that means is that we're made for relationship, communion, and love—with God and each other. An exciting thing about seeing the Trinity as dance is that God invites us to join the dance. We're invited to share in the very life and being of God. It's an open circle that includes everyone who will be led by God.

The passage from John's Gospel we've read is part of a larger section (chapters 13-17) where Jesus is preparing his disciples for his going to the cross. He's going to leave them, but he promises he'll be back through resurrection. And then he will go away, but they will receive another one to be with them. He's talking about the Holy Spirit. A lot of what Jesus teaches about the Holy Spirit is in these chapters.

The Gospel of John is a big part of why we believe in the Trinity. We hear about God's Word, God's Son, becoming flesh, human, and revealing God's glory. For those first century Jews to come to believe that Jesus was really God with them, the embodiment of God, was a huge leap. Then they had to work out what that belief meant. Jesus was God, but God remained in heaven. Jesus prayed to the Father and depended on the Father. And Jesus was empowered by the Holy Spirit. I think part of the reason we have

the doctrine of the Trinity is to show that Jesus wasn't just talking to himself when he prayed. Later, the disciples also believed that God was truly with them in their experience of the Holy Spirit. So they had to work out what that meant.

The Bible doesn't use the word "trinity." It was coined later to describe the one God's being in three Persons. But Scripture is full of references to "Father, Son, and Spirit" and it recognizes that Son and Spirit, as well as the Father, are divine. This section of John's Gospel includes much of the teaching that our faith in the Trinity is based on. During the church's first four centuries, teachers and pastors worked out what the Scriptures imply and developed the doctrine of the Trinity to describe God.

Here in John 16, Jesus has been telling the disciples that they'll face opposition and trouble in the world. Then he says he has more to tell them about that, but they can't bear it at the moment. But the Spirit of truth will come and guide them into all truth. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, is our guide and teacher. This doesn't mean the Spirit gives us all scientific and philosophical knowledge. It means the Holy Spirit guides us in the way of truth, which is the way of Jesus who is the truth (Jn 14:6). The Holy Spirit lead us into truth, in line with God's covenant faithfulness, into the full revelation of God's character in Christ (Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*).

Just as Jesus didn't speak and act on his own, but said and did what he heard and saw from God the Father (Jn 5:19, 30), the Holy Spirit doesn't speak on his own, but speaks what he hears. The Spirit glorifies Jesus by making him known to those first followers and to every generation of believers in Jesus—including us. Through the Holy Spirit, we can have a relationship with Jesus as intimate as his first followers had. The Spirit makes known what belongs to Jesus, which is also what belongs to the Father.

God comes and makes himself known in Jesus. God gives the Holy Spirit to continue making himself known. To know the Holy Spirit is to know Jesus. To know Jesus is to know God. Ideas like this are part of why we believe in God as Trinity. And these chapters of John are filled with ideas like this.

Jumping back into chapter 14, we hear Jesus say, “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them” (v. 23). Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus and the Father come to us and make their home with us. The Trinity lives and dwells and abides in us when we believe. That’s amazing!

Jesus says the Holy Spirit will guide us. The apostle Paul writes that “those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God” (Romans 8:14). God’s Spirit leads us in God’s ways, in “paths of righteousness for his name’s sake” (Psalm 23:3). The Holy Spirit leads us into life and then leads us in living out the life God has for us. The Holy Spirit draws us into the Trinity’s dance and then takes the lead as we dance with God. The church becomes God’s dancing partner. The Spirit guides our steps and moves with us. We respond and move with the Spirit; we follow the Spirit’s lead.

One writer sums this up as she describes the Trinity as practical:

The heart of Christian faith is the encounter with the God of Jesus Christ who makes possible both our union with God and communion with each other. In this encounter God invites people to share in divine life and grace through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit; at the same time, we are called to live in new relationship with one another, as we are gathered together by the Spirit into the body of Christ. The personal and communal dimensions of Christian faith are inseparable. (LaCugna; in Collins 274)

Some like to say that the church is an icon—a little picture—of who God is. We’re created and re-created in God’s image. So the church represents the life of God as community. We talk about “God in three Persons,” but that doesn’t mean three isolated individuals. In the biblical understanding, and still in many cultures, to be a person is to be in community. You’re not a whole person in isolation from others. This is something important that teaching on the Trinity shows us. We’re not solo dancers. We’re caught up in a group dance with all of God’s people and with the three Persons who are God. “Through faith in Christ, through baptism *into* the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19),

we enter into the life of the Trinity and are graciously included as partners” (Steve Seamands, *Ministry in the Image of God* 12).

There’s so much more that can be said about God as Trinity. There are so many implications of this reality for us. I’ll illustrate just one—that we can know God and have joyful intimacy with God. Sandra Wilson is the adult child of an alcoholic. She’s also a sexual abuse survivor who became a family therapist, teacher, author, and speaker. While working on a book about abandonment she began to experience new depths of intimacy with God as she made changes in her understanding and practice of prayer. She started attempting “listening prayer.” Instead of doing all the talking and expecting God to do all the listening, she tried simply listening to God. She began to hear Christ speak words of love to her in her heart. She heard him say things like this:

You are just beginning to get an inkling of what I mean when I say I love you. I mean I really love you! You matter to me. Those times when you are most enthralled—most moved with love for me—are but a dim reflection of how much I love you.... And no matter how wonderful, how loving and merciful, you come to know I am, I am far more.

As she continued in this practice, her relationship with Christ grew. At the same time, she says, “Somewhere deep inside, the ancient ache of abandonment also began to subside. It was as if—for the first time—I met my Immanuel. Jesus, God with *me*, became real. So did his promise of eternally nonabandoning love. I never anticipated what a profound change that would make in my life” (Seamands 56-58).

God is life and light and love. God lives in an eternal relationship of love as Father, Son, and Spirit. God wants to be known. God wants us to know him. The 3D glasses of the doctrine of the Trinity help us see God more clearly, more vividly, in a deeper way. God invites us to share his life, to take part in the divine dance, to receive God’s Spirit living in us, glorifying Jesus and bringing us to the Father. Will you say yes to God who loves you and will never abandon you?