

Sermon: "Trinity, Mystery, and Truth"

Date: June 12, 2022

Scripture: 3 John 3-8

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Today is Trinity Sunday, the first Sunday between Pentecost and the end of the Christian year. On this Sunday, we stop to remember that God is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer: all three-in-one. The classic formation of this Triune God is that God is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Indeed, some churches only recognize a baptism as a Christian baptism if it invokes God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit during the act of baptism. The idea of the Trinity is so important and central to some branches of Christianity that baptism itself is considered invalid if it does not invoke the Trinity.

On this Sunday, we remember that the God that was, and is, and ever shall be has become known in the unseen God of Abraham, was fully seen in Jesus Christ¹, and is revealed in the Holy Spirit². All three of these are consubstantial with each other, which means they are all part of the same substance or essence of God.

Did what I say cause your head to spin? If so, you're not alone. On a lark I googled the phrases "Trinity Sunday" and "headache." There were over 40,000 hits on Google, and the numbers only rise when you take the Sunday out of "Trinity Sunday."

This whole idea of the Trinity is by nature mysterious and strange. You might wish to more fully understand the Trinity. You might believe that this idea must be completely understandable if the church has held this idea as integral to Christian belief for centuries. I would love to explain

¹ Colossians 1:15

² John 15:26

the Trinity to you in depth this morning, but one of the key realities of this piece of theology is that it defies explanation. Indeed, this concept of the Trinity, which is not explicitly taught in the scriptures, is quite complicated. Mysterious by nature, the Trinity has confounded and befuddled people since the earliest days of the church. Debate about this subject has led to people calling others heretics, has led to people being cast out of the church, and has led to people walking away from the church community.

The Trinity has been a problematic idea within Christianity, but many people, including me, have found it integral to their faith and their conception of God. While the Trinity is not explicitly taught, it certainly finds itself in the background throughout the scriptures. One of the greatest risks surrounding any conversation around the Trinity is that the idea of the Trinity is easily oversimplified, but I think we can begin to discuss the whole concept if we speak from the perspective of experience. In other words, the Trinity may best be described by experience rather than defined by terminology.

For me, my experience of the Trinity began with an understanding of God as my Creator. As a child, I went to a little United Methodist Church in Snyder, NY, which is a hamlet of the town of Amherst outside of Buffalo. I first learned about God in the Sunday School classes where I sat with other kids as teachers taught us about God. We ran through church halls, caused chaos at Nativity plays, and did our best to bring a bit of spontaneity into the life of the church, but the church still managed to teach us about the nature of God.

My image of God revolved around all three parts of the Trinity, but the ideas that stuck in my head as a child are the same ideas that may have stuck in many of your heads. If you're in the sanctuary and exit out down the eastern stairwell out of the sanctuary, you'll probably see

one of the fundamental images that stuck in my head on the landing. For those of you on Zoom, on the landing there is the image of a large boat ready to ride on the waters with many animals in the hold.

I grew up with imagery like that of Noah's Ark sticking in my mind. The vivid imagery, exciting story, and interesting ideas about how that exactly works stuck in my mind. Similarly, my memories are full of images from the scripture including that of God splitting the sea in Exodus, keeping Daniel safe from lions, and God creating both Adam and Eve: one from dirt and the other strangely enough from bone. These ideas were fundamental to my understanding of God, but one thing that continues to ring out was one simple idea that the church taught me very well. God created people like me and God loved them enough to do all these strange things in the Bible.

As a child, I somewhat understood that Jesus was the Son of God, but I never quite understood what that meant until I was a teenager. We had moved from one town to another after my mother passed away in my youth. I was an awkward loner who had a rough start to his teenage years. While I heard that God loved me throughout my childhood, as a teenager I found it hard to believe. After all, I didn't really love me. In fact, I will be honest and tell you that there were several years where I hated my life and wished I'd never been born. For many years, I may have believed that God loved people like me, but often thought that God was a fool.

When I was fifteen, I came to a place of utter despair where I had to make a choice. At the end of my rope, I felt as if the choice between me was to literally give up on life or to find a reason to live. At fifteen years of age, I sat with my Bible and for the first time understood what my Sunday School teachers and youth group leaders had been telling me. For the first time in my life, I read the stories of Jesus' life and saw

Jesus reaching out with love and compassion to the people he came across. Although I had heard that Jesus loved me for years, at fifteen I suddenly saw that the gracious love of Christ was for more than the people in the stories. The love of Jesus was also meant for me.

At fifteen, I began to understand the love of Jesus and suddenly the love of God taught to me as a child began to make more sense. Why did God send an ark? God loved people deeply and didn't want people to simply be wiped away. God loved them. Although I still had questions and I honestly still wonder at times about the necessity of wiping out all but a few people during that story, I began to see the connection between the love of Jesus and the love of God. Why did God free the Israelites? God wanted them free from slavery and Jesus wanted people to be free from death. Two of the three consubstantial parts of the Trinity began to connect in my heart.

Of course, the Holy Spirit was the hardest to grasp. As a child I remember Sunday School teachers singing songs and I remember the pastor talking about the Fruit of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit was connected with all of the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control that came about in a life of faith, but it didn't sink in easily. To be honest, I'm not sure I really even understood what patience or faithfulness looked like when I was young. As a teenager I connected the Holy Spirit with people who wanted to speak in tongues, to share weird prophecies, and to heal people with the laying on of hands. It was all very strange.

To be honest, the Holy Spirit is still strange. The scriptures teach us that the Holy Spirit guides us and advocates for us. Jesus sent the Holy Spirit on Pentecost and the church was invited to learn what that meant as they walked the road of faith with the Spirit. In many ways if God was the One who created me as a lovable person and if Jesus

was the One who brought Light into my darkness, then the Spirit was the One who taught me how to live by faith.

Through the Spirit I have made friendships, stood tall when scared, and learned what it meant to be the person God called me to be. Through the Spirit I have offered forgiveness to people who harmed me, have lived with mercy when I wanted to lash out, and have come to understand that grace is something more than poise or even a simple prayer. The Spirit is the One who has been my teacher throughout the year.

With the Spirit as my Teacher, the Christ as my Savior, and Adonai as my Provider, I have come to live in relationship with the Trinity. Spending time in church theology has taught me the simple truth that Jesus may embody love, but love is also there in the Lord Almighty and in the Holy Ghost. The Wisdom of God might be revealed in the Holy Spirit, but the Wise Word of God was there at the beginning in the same way that it was there when the Cloud descended upon Mount Sinai. Consubstantial in nature, these ways of explaining and understanding God really blend into each other in ways that are quite mysterious and really do defy explanation, but in my experience, the Triune God is my God.

In a lot of ways, the way I came to believe in the Trinity reminds me of what we read in our passage today. In fact, although it has taken me a while to get to the passage in this sermon, my whole view of the Trinity can be summarized quite nicely by this small passage in the Book of 3 John.

In this small book attributed to the Apostle John by church tradition, John wrote with joy to a friend named Gaius. In his letter, John shares with great joy and happiness about what he has heard about his friend.

Gaius is faithful and John has heard about the faithful life that Gaius was living from across the miles. From what we can infer, John sent companions out to share the good news with the world, they crossed Gaius' path, and Gaius provided for them with love and kindness.

Just take a moment to look at how John describes Gaius' life. John wrote in verses 3-5:

“³I was overjoyed when the brothers and sisters arrived and spoke highly of your faithfulness to the truth, shown by how you live according to the truth. ⁴ I have no greater joy than this: to hear that my children are living according to the truth. ⁵ Dear friend, you act faithfully in whatever you do for our brothers and sisters, even though they are strangers.”

From what John reports, Gaius is faithful and kind, sharing with the family of God even when Gaius doesn't really know them. As noted by scholar Moody Smith:³

“The Elder praises Gaius for his hospitality to emissaries, who were likely representing the Elder himself... It is noteworthy that the emissaries include strangers (v. 5), eloquent testimony to the universality of the church, which is already a worldwide community binding together in faith in Jesus Christ and mutual love people who have never seen one another.”

In caring for strangers, Gaius embodies the heart and soul of Christian hospitality. Through kindness, love, and generosity, Gaius acts in such a way that over the miles John hears about it. Gaius is faithful and kind. Gaius provides for people he doesn't even know and in doing so

³ Smith, D. Moody. First, Second, and Third John (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching) (pp. 151-152). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

Gaius helps the believers to live out their lives of faith. John looks at the life of Gaius and is filled with gratitude. If we walk away with nothing else from this short piece of scripture, living a faithful life like Gaius is a good goal to have as Christians.

When we look at the book of Third John as a whole, more than a third of this small book is spent describing the faithfulness of Gaius. When preparing his notes on the New Testament, John Wesley, the primary founder of the Methodist movement, took the time to note that when you look at the life of Gaius, you are looking at someone who was living a life of faithfulness, uprightness, and sincerity.⁴

What does the rest of the book discuss? Five verses of the eighteen are spent saying hello and goodbye to Gaius. John cannot wait to see Gaius! Of the remaining four verses, one of them builds up another believer named Demetrius. The other three were a warning against excluding others and an encouragement for Gaius to continue to imitate and practice all that is good.

Friends, when John wrote Gaius, John presented two ways of life. One way was a way of exclusion and pain that led to suffering. The other way was one of generosity and kindness that led to blessing. John wrote Gaius, pointed out that he was living a good life, and then encouraged him to continue being faithful. I don't know how or why Gaius chose to live a different life than Diotrephes, the man who spent his time excluding and harming others. I do know that John heard about the goodness of Gaius's deeds and stopped to give thanks that Gaius was living a faithful life.

⁴ Wesley, John. "Notes on the New Testament"

<http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/john-wesleys-notes-on-the-bible/notes-on-the-third-epistle-of-st-john/>

Why did John believe this about Gaius? Why did John give thanks? John believed the testimony of the people who saw and experienced the goodness evident in Gaius' life. John heard the words of the people of God and believed in the goodness of Gaius through both their testimony and his knowledge of his friend.

In the same way, I don't always know how the Trinity works. I don't always understand how the church came to believe what the church came to believe. To be certain, I can point to all the controversies and look up the viewpoints on both sides of any given heresy in church history. I can present the facts we have, but I wasn't there when those decisions were made.

A lot of what I believe about the Trinity is based upon the witness of the people who came before me and the experiences I have had as a person. To a certain extent, I believe because of the faithful, kind, and loving people who raised me in the church. They sought the truth, took note of what was good and true, came to believe, and now I believe as well. Along with my own experiences, I have come to have faith in the Trinity. Like John seeing the goodness of Gaius through the testimony of others and his own experience of his friend, I have come to believe in the Trinity through the testimony of those who came before me and my experiences with God..

Yes, I believe in Trinity even though it is honestly beyond me and all my thoughts. I don't always understand every aspect of it, but I do believe in the Creator that my childhood church taught to me, in the Redeemer that revealed the love of God to me as a teenager, and in the Spirit that walks through everyday life with me. With this consubstantial triune God that defies description and explanation, I find a way to live a faithful and good life.

I want to invite you to believe in that same loving triune God today. The Trinity is far more complicated than simply the three leaves of a clover being one clover with three leaves. The Trinity is more complicated than being like water that is H₂O while being ice, water, and vapor. Theologically, it is more complicated than those ideas, but at heart of it, I comprehend the triune God as being of One essence that is consubstantial in nature. I think John describes it best in another part of the Bible: (John 1:1-5)

“In the beginning was the Word
and the Word was with God
and the Word was God.

The Word was with God in the beginning.
Everything came into being through the Word,
and without the Word
nothing came into being.

What came into being
through the Word was life,
and the life was the light for all people.
The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light.”

Let us pray...