

Finding the Trinity in the Bible – and in Your Life

2 Corinthians 13:11-13 and Matthew 28:16-20

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Trinity Sunday

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This day on the church calendar is known as Trinity Sunday, and Trinity Sunday always follows immediately after Pentecost, and it is the last important day on the church calendar until the beginning of Advent.

And all around the world today, at least in the more liturgical churches, the focus is going to be on the Trinity.

And I think there is something remarkable about that. People like you and me, believers on every continent, will be coming together and remembering the God who reveals himself to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. (My mother will sometimes say on Sunday, my pastor preached from the same text today that you did. And I say, “**Well, I’m glad to hear it, but I’m not surprised. There’s a reason for that.**”)

Let’s read together one of the classic texts in scripture which mentions the Trinity, though not by using that word. There are others, of course, several of them, but this is probably the best known:

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

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

I want to take a few minutes this morning to think deeply with you about a subject that is very important to us, but one that we seldom talk about – namely, **the Trinity**.

And there is a temptation that I feel, whenever I approach a subject like this, to be kind of apologetic about it. In other words, I feel as though I should apologize for getting all theological with you – instead of being pastoral or practical.

No one has ever actually said this to me, but one comment that I fear goes like this: **“Doug, don’t give us abstract theological ideas, this is not a seminary classroom, just give us something to hold onto. We’re struggling people, so give us something that we can take home.”**

Anne Lamott, an American writer, famously summed up this point of view in one of her early books. She was at a point in her life when she was overcome with an addiction to alcohol, among other things, and so she said, **“I didn’t need to understand the hypostatic unity of the Trinity; I just needed to turn my life over to whoever came up with redwood trees.”**

I get that. I understand the feeling behind those words.

So, what I want to do is to talk about the Trinity in a way that will be helpful to us, in a way that will give us something solid to stand on. If you call yourself a believer and a follower of Christ, I think this is one of those subjects that we should know about, that we should feel confident talking about.

One theologian has pointed out – and I don’t think I had ever paid much attention to this before – but one contemporary theologian, who was anticipating the criticism that teaching about the Trinity is not very practical, said that when the world of the disciples was about to collapse around them, when Jesus’ arrest and death were just hours away, when they had just eaten their last meal together, what was it, what was the subject, that Jesus chose to talk about with them?

Do you know?

Well, read John 17. There are long paragraphs there that talk about how Jesus and the Father are one. **“I am in the Father,”** he said, **“and the Father is in me.”** That’s trinitarian language, isn’t it? And we may not see the comfort in those words, but Jesus meant to be comforting to them.

Do you know something? I think most of us know this subject intuitively. Anyone who has ever had an experience of God – whether we have the language to describe it or not – has had an experience of the Trinity. I’ll come back to that in a moment.

I can’t help but tell this story, which I found last week.

There’s an American preacher named George Buttrick. He died more than 30 years ago, but one day, according to the story, he was sitting on an airplane scribbling some sermon notes on a pad of paper. No one does that anymore, which gives you an idea about how old this story is.

Anyway, as he was writing, the man in the seat next to him asked what he was working on. And Buttrick very pleasantly said, **“Oh, I’m working on my sermon for next Sunday. I’m a preacher.”**

And to that, the man said, **“Oh, religion. Well, I like to keep my religion simple – no complicated doctrines. ‘Do unto others as you would like them to do unto you.’ That’s my religion.”**

One reason I like this story so much is that I know how these airplane conversations go, when the person sitting next to me finds out what I do.

But Buttrick, who thought faster than I usually do in those situations, said, **“I see, and what is it that you do?”**

To which the man replied, **“Well, I teach in the science department at the university. I’m an astronomer.”**

“Ah yes, astronomy,” Buttrick said. **“Well, I don’t like to get technical about my science. ‘Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are.’ That’s my astronomy – why would anyone want more than that?”**

I’m never quite fast enough in those situations to be that clever! Anyway, I like the challenge in that, and I hope you do too. The Golden Rule is not a bad place to start, just as the creator of Redwood trees was not a bad place for Anne Lamott to start, but maybe there is more we should know.

I think that we should expect no less from our faith than we do from any other area of our lives. In fact, maybe you’ll agree with me that we should expect a great deal more.

I mean, if we’re going to anchor our lives in something, if we are going to give our ultimate allegiance to something, then that thing – whatever it is – should be as strong and as solid as anything we can imagine.

To get back to the Trinity, it just so happens that quite a few people are talking about this subject right now, which is amazing when you think about it, given how secular the culture is. And the reason they’re talking about the Trinity is largely because of a movie, which was based on a best-selling book, both of which are called *The Shack*.

The book, which is a novel, was published in 2007, and the movie appeared in theaters this spring, so both are very recent.

Full disclosure: I’ve read the book, but I haven’t seen the movie.

As far as the book is concerned, it was one of those things that I thought I should read in case someone asked me about. It was not something I was all that keen to read on my own. And when I was finished, I thought, **“Mmm, that was interesting.”**

As you can imagine, it leaves a great deal to be desired. It’s not a careful doctrinal statement. It’s not very precise. And the author would probably say that it wasn’t written to be systematic theology. (I don’t know. I’ve never heard an interview with the author.)

I don’t even know where to begin to find fault with it. There is so much I could say about it. And a great deal has been said and written to criticize it.

Maybe the most obvious complaint about the book, the most troubling feature to me, is that in the Bible only Jesus took on human form, but in the book and in the movie as well, all three persons take on human form, which is obviously contrary to what we believe and contrary to what the Bible tells us.

In the book, God – the first person of the Trinity – is an African American woman, who spends a lot of time in the kitchen, and the holy Spirit is an Asian woman. The character of Jesus is the most closely aligned with the person we meet in the Bible. In the book he is a Jewish carpenter who even wears a tool belt.

Maybe the best we can say – and this is pretty good, don't get me wrong – maybe the best we can say is that the book and the movie have started a conversation about something that is very, very important to us. And I hope you take of that in the conversations that you have with friends and colleagues.

If you've ever had a conversation with a Muslim about God, then you know that any talk about the Trinity is a conversation stopper. If you've done any traveling at all in predominately Muslim areas of the world, then you have heard the call to prayer – five times a day.

And whenever I hear that call to prayer, it always sounds like a rebuke to me: **“There is no God but God.”** Over and over again, a daily rejection of Christian teaching.

But Muslims aren't the only one who are troubled by the Christian understanding of God.

Jews too find our talk about the Trinity to be deeply troubling. Have you ever had this conversation with a Jewish friend? God taking human form is unthinkable. All the way back in Deuteronomy 6:4 – one of the most important verses in all of scripture for a Jewish believer: **“Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One.”**

How much clearer could scripture be on this subject? (A Jewish believer would say.)

And yet, we Christians insist on talking about God – not as one, but as three. Why is that?

I think the simplest explanation is that this **“God in three persons”** language is our way of talking about the mystery and complexity of the God we experience.

As I said a few minutes ago, most of us know this subject intuitively. We've all had an experience of God, or most of us have, but putting all of that into precise language is very nearly impossible.

I think about those times in my life when I was most acutely aware of God's presence, and thankfully there have been a few of those times, not every everyone can say that, and in spite of the theological training I've had, in spite of all the impressive books I have on my shelf, I find it very difficult, you might be surprised how difficult, to describe what I know to be true.

My experience was real. But my words always seem inadequate.

Over the years I have heard more bad children's sermons about the Trinity than I care to remember. And I have given some of them.

Have you heard the children's sermon that compares the Trinity to water? This is actually an illustration of a trinitarian heresy, a famous one, known as modalism. God is like water, we tell the children, because God comes in three forms – liquid, solid, and gas (or vapor).

And as I say it to the children, I feel so proud of myself, but then I notice that the children have no idea what I just said. The children in this church are very bright; maybe I should try it with them.

Here's another: I have said to children that I am a father, and a husband, and a son. But I am the same person, with these three distinct identities.

But even that is inadequate. Children had no idea what I was talking about, and I'm sure that some adults had no idea either.

Last week I read something that I found very helpful and that seemed to put this subject nicely: **“The truth of the Trinity is not a problem to be solved [which is how we usually think about it]. Rather, it’s a solution.”**

And I think that’s right. The Trinity is our explanation. It’s our way of introducing others to the God we have come to know.

The earliest followers of Jesus didn’t start with the idea of a Trinity and then look around for illustrations of it; they came to it, slowly, as a way to explain what they had experienced, to put into words what they knew to be true.

Most of you already know that the word **“Trinity”** doesn’t occur anywhere in the Bible. When people hear that for the first time, they are typically surprised, as I was. But as early as Paul’s letters and Matthew’s gospel (in the verses you heard this morning) there are these obvious references to **“Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”** in the same sentence.

Jesus, as you heard, was telling the eleven to **“make disciples of all nations”** and then – here’s the interesting bit, which by the way is just as clear in the Greek text – he tells them to baptize **“in the name [singular!] of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”** One name. A kind of corporate identity, as though these three persons belong together. Three persons, one address.

We know these verses so well that we’re not even startled by this, and yet it is startling.

Rudolf Otto was a German Lutheran theologian and one of the most important theologians of the early 20th century. In 1917 he published what was his most important and most well-known book, which was called *The Idea of the Holy* – or *Das Heilige* auf Deutsch. A century later that book, remarkably, is still in print, and is now available in 20 languages, and is still required reading by theology students.

And it should probably be at our church’s book stall, along with the other fine books we have there. It’s surprisingly brief.

What was astonishing about that book, then and now, was Rudolf Otto’s description of the experience of God. Too often, he said, our language about God ends up being dry and rational and therefore lifeless...when the truth is that an experience of God is anything but dry and lifeless.

Rudolf Otto – and I’ll never forget the first time I read this book, sitting alone in a theological library – Rudolf Otto described God’s presence as a mystery, which comes over us and takes control of us and overpowers us and holds us firmly in its grip. And he says that our creeds and our doctrinal statements can’t begin to capture the reality of this God, who defies description.

And that day, as I read those words, I remember feeling a chill and having goosebumps, which is not something you ordinarily feel when you read German theologians. But someone – a German theologian, of all people – had finally described the God I knew, the God that I wanted to serve with my life, the God who had invaded my life and claimed it for his own.

Who was this God? I had lots of words to describe God at that point in my life, but my experience of God was not something that could be captured by the language I had been given. Does that make sense?

I needed something more. This God – the one I knew – was far above me, powerful, majestic, beyond anything I could imagine or conceive.

But this God was also alongside me. This God had walked with me throughout my life, this God was a constant and comforting presence, someone I could talk to, or not. Sometimes I found that I simply enjoyed being alone with this God, aware of his presence.

And then, finally, this God was within me, a power at work within me, a power that was changing me slowly and painfully into something new, something better than I could become on my own.

And there it is – did you hear the trinitarian language? – God above me, God alongside me, and God within me. At that moment I had at last found the Trinity. But not as a doctrine. This was my experience. And I am happy to say that it is my experience today.

Tell me, how do you experience God? What language would you use?

Let us pray: God, we thank you for the mystery of your presence in our lives. We thank you for the wonderful reality that we come to know and that we are able to experience. Give us language to say what we know to be true. Help us to know and understand and comprehend and grasp your mystery. We pray to you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.