

May 27, 2018

First Sunday After Pentecost (Trinity Sunday)

John 3:1-17 (Year B)

Lutheran Church of Our Father, Greensboro, NC

So I like to say that there are two main math problems in the church, and neither of them make any sense. One is the whole idea of Jesus being fully God and fully human and yet only one person, and the other is the Trinity; God being both three and one. And try as we might to understand it, we just can't. How can we say that there is only one God, and yet God is three? How can God be Father, Son, and Spirit, and still be one God? The math just doesn't add up.

And I kinda feel like, maybe because it's so confusing, we don't ever really talk about making sense of it. Instead we just mention it in passing. We refer to it abstractly in sermons, but not in ways that actually help us understand it. We say things like "The Trinity is a mystery" or "The Trinity is an outpouring of love" or "The Trinity is a relationship." Which are all true, but it's like passing a flashlight over something really fast; you catch a glimpse of it, but you can't really make out what it is, and so it ends up not really being very helpful.

So this morning I want to take some time to really shine the flashlight on the Trinity. To just dive into what we as the church say about God being both Three and One. And so today's sermon might feel a bit more like a lecture or a Sunday School lesson than a sermon, but I think on this day – Trinity Sunday – it's ok to just dive in head first and see what we can figure out about our Triune God.

And, since I did say this is a math problem, we are gonna start by talking a bit about the basic formula of the Trinity. And then we'll talk a little about what the Trinity isn't, and then we'll finish by talking a little about what the Trinity is.

So the first thing I want to make sure is perfectly clear is that the Trinity *is* God. God is the Trinity and the Trinity is God. So we just use those terms interchangeably, or sometimes we combine them and say "the Triune God." But it isn't that sometimes God is Trinity and sometimes God is just God. God is always, always, always Trinity. We have a Triune God, we just sometimes use the word Trinity and sometimes use the word God.

And, what's more, this is how God is and always has been. Since before time began, God was Trinity. The Trinity wasn't created when Jesus was born as human. It wasn't created when the Spirit was poured out at Pentecost. God has always been Three in One. God has always been Trinity. Since before the world was formed, when God hovered over the waters. Since before Jesus was born, when the Word was with God and the Word was God. God has always been three-in-one. God has always been and will always be Triune.

So with that established, let's start by talking about the formula of the Trinity, and for that we'll turn to the cover of your bulletin. That picture first shows up about 800 years ago, and it is used to help us visualize a couple of the things that we can say are definitively true about God. When we are talking about the Trinity there are a lot of things that are confusing, or are a mystery, or are incomprehensible, but these things here are things we can say with certainty. The Father is God. The Son is God. The Spirit is God. And yet the Father is not the same as the Son or the Spirit. And the Son is not the same as the Father or the Spirit. And the Spirit is not the same as the Father or the Son. But again, they are all God. They are not each 1/3 of God. All three are all God.

The fancy theological language we use for this is Three Persons of the Trinity, but one substance or essence. God is made manifest in three distinct persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and yet all three share one substance. It's what we say in the Nicene Creed, that the Son is of one being with the Father, which in the original Latin actually says of one substance with the Father.

But none of this *really* makes any sense, and so that's why this is where we pump the breaks and look for a good analogy. But the truth is that there just isn't a good analogy for understanding the Trinity. Now that won't stop us from trying, but it is important to realize that even as these analogies help us understand God in some ways, they also fall short of explaining God accurately in others. Because ultimately, every analogy for God I've ever heard highlights one heresy or another.

Take my shampoo bottle for an example. I think it is helpful in showing how *one* bottle of shampoo can still be *three* different things, but the analogy falls short, because ultimately this is just one product that does three things. It's not three different products that all do everything, distinct and yet unified.

Another popular analogy is to say God is like water, which can be ice, water, or vapor. All three are water, and yet all three are distinct. And while this is helpful in showing how God can be unique in three ways but still just one essence, it's really confessing the ancient heresy of modalism. Modalism is the idea that God takes on one of three different shapes or forms or *modes* at different times. So *sometimes* God assumes the role of the Father, and sometimes God assumes the role of the Son, and sometimes God assumes the role of the Spirit. Just like *sometimes* water is liquid and *sometimes* its gas and *sometimes* it is solid. But this isn't right, because God is eternally three-in-one. God is always, all the time, both three and one. God doesn't just slip on God's Father hat when God needs to do Fatherly things and then slip on the Spirit hat when God needs to do Spirit-y things.

And this is also why it can be problematic to call the Trinity Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer instead of Father Son and Holy Spirit. Because the Father doesn't just create, but also redeems and sustains, just as the Son redeems but also creates and sustains, and the Spirit sustains, and redeems and creates. Those roles or modes are not limited to one person of the Trinity, but God is always doing all three, just as God is always the Father and the Spirit and the Son.

While we're at it, this is also the issue with analogies like one person being a father, and a husband, and a carpenter. Yes, a person can operate in multiple roles. But like the shampoo bottle, we are still only talking about one person – not three, and giving ways of that one person operating in different modes. God is not one person, but three, who all share one substance.

Another popular analogy would be to say that God is like an egg, which has the shell, the white, and the yolk – and yet is just one egg. And while this analogy does a good job of showing how three things can be one, it's actually teaching what we might call the heresy of partialism, which says that each part of the Trinity is 1/3 God. Because we certainly wouldn't say that the egg shell, egg white, and egg yolk are all the same substance. But we know that God the Father Son and Spirit are all of one substance with each other, and that they are not each 1/3 of God, but each fully God.

A final analogy is to say that God is like the sun, which is itself a star, but is also light, and heat. But this is probably the most problematic of the three, because with this we've actually stumbled into the heresy of Arianism. Arianism says that God the Father is the original God, and the Son and Spirit are creations that come from God, like how light and heat aren't the star itself, but products of it. Basically, this one elevates the Father to the status of *God*, while demoting the Son and Spirit to *like* God. Which is what we do when we say stuff like God, Son, and Spirit. We've fallen into the trap of simplifying the Father as God, and Son and Spirit as demi-God or God-like. But this isn't how it works, right? As the Nicene Creed says: the Son is eternally begotten of the Father, not created. Or as the Athanasian Creed says (which I know we never read, but is actually really helpful when it comes to Trinity stuff): "Uncreated is the Father; uncreated is the Son; uncreated is the Spirit. The Father is infinite; the Son is infinite; the Holy Spirit is infinite. Eternal is the Father; eternal is the Son; eternal is the Spirit: And yet there are not three eternal beings, but one who is eternal; as there are not three uncreated and unlimited beings, but one who is uncreated and unlimited.

And so now we have arrived back at a theologically proper understanding, but one that doesn't make much sense. Which is ok. Because God is too big to make sense. And so as we try to explain God, we also rest in knowing that we cannot explain God. God is God, and we are us, and there will always be things that make sense to God and are possible with God that our tiny human brains cannot understand. But there are also some things we can understand.

We can understand that God is a relationship. That at God's core is a relationship between three persons all united as one. And so one way to think of the Trinity is as the most intimate, loving relationship possible; that the Father and Son love each other infinitely more than we can imagine, and the Spirit is that love that is shared between them. And so when we are in relationship with other, we are indeed bearing the image of God. In fact, you might say that though we are all created in God's image, we reflect it most closely in the relationships we hold with one another, because God exists as relationship. And while we cannot possibly fathom the depths of this relationship, we can understand and believe that it is true.

And we can understand that God is an endless outpouring and receiving of love. That the very nature of God is to share one essence. Which is to say that the nature of God is to empty Godself in poured out love for others. And so another way to think of the Trinity is to imagine this one essence of God – this love that God has – as something that each person of the Trinity is always pouring out into the other two. And so all the time Father is emptying Godself into the Son and the Spirit. But the Father never runs out, because at the same time the Son is emptying into the Father and the Spirit, and the Spirit is emptying Godself into the Father and the Son. And we are brought into that outpouring of love. That outpouring of love sends Jesus to be born as human and live like us. That outpouring of love is willing to hang on a cross and die for the sake of the world that God so loves. That outpouring of love conquers death and raises us to new life with Christ. And that outpouring of love fills the apostles' and generation after generation of believers with God's own self, sending us to bless the world through it. And while we cannot possibly fathom the depths of this love, we can understand and believe that it is true.

Finally, we can understand that God is indeed a mystery. That God is beyond our comprehension. Because God is too big and too good for us to understand. God is a mystery because though we try our hardest to understand God better, we cannot understand God fully. Because we are not God. Only God is. And thanks be to God for that. Amen.