

Trinity Sunday The Starting Point

Today is Trinity Sunday, another day which the gathered church considers special. It is a day that we celebrate the self-revelation of God to humanity. We keep the vestments in the liturgical color white. The color used for celebrating the times of Christmas, Easter and Communion. However, this is the only church celebration which is about a doctrine, not an event. Perhaps that is why it seems we often do not celebrate as much as we try to explain the unexplainable. We have symbols representing the Trinity—the three interlocking circles on my stole is one of them, or the Celtic knot. You will have seen and heard explanations based on the 3 leaves of the clover or the three states of water. You may have heard various theological ways of describing this relationship within the Triune Godhead—Calvin used the terms the Threeness of the One and the Oneness of the Three. I am sure that those who love systematic theology find that helpful. Karl Barth liked to use the term *peri-choresis* from early in church history to explain the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This term is derived when you get the Greek words for around something—like “perimeter” and the one which forms the basis for “Choreography”—dancing, and then put them together. This forms the image of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit enfolded together and dancing around. In a sense this concept of the Trinity comes from the synthesis by people of all we have celebrated over the year which center on God’s mighty acts in the history of humanity and weaving them together. Christmas-Epiphany which begins the year celebrating God’s taking flesh and dwelling among us in Jesus Christ is followed by Easter which celebrates the abundant love which led to the suffering of the cross and the victory over death of the Resurrection and then last week’s Pentecost which celebrates the arrival of the promised Holy Spirit. Each of these actions is described within Scripture as the result of the love which God the creator has for us. The doctrine of the Trinity has as its starting point these revelations of who God is and how the work of God unfolds among us. The triune God is the basis of all that we are and all that we do as Christians. We are baptized in the name of this triune God; as his claimed baptized ones we bear the name of the triune God and become part of that mystical body known as the body of Christ. When we affirm our faith, we use the creeds drawn from Scripture which tie these acts of God together within the doctrine of the Trinity. We pray to God the Father, the Almighty through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ his son and by the Holy Spirit sent to guide and strengthen us. The Trinity is the starting and ending point of our faith because it is described, if not explained in our Scriptures. When discussing or talking about the Trinity, I am frankly suspicious of those who claim to understand it—after all that means they understand God. The great early Christian Father Augustine said understanding the Trinity was beyond him. I am quite willing to be counted among those, like Augustine, who are willing to let Scripture tell them about the Trinity without trying to dissect and label it or go beyond what Scripture reveals to us. I also think that John Calvin’s statement that the Lord has given to us all the knowledge that we need to have in order to have faith works here. Scripture’s witness to God is sufficient without any hypothesis about God’s nature. If you are going to talk about the Trinity, you have to begin with what is revealed to us in Scripture—which is what led to the doctrine in the first place. One important facet is that at the heart of our understanding of God as somehow three-in-one is the notion that you can’t begin the conversation without talking about relationships. All that coming from and going to; being sent and sending that is recorded tells us clearly that

the named participants—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—are in relation to one another. You cannot encounter the witness of Scripture without understanding that God is so full of love that it overflows. In describing God as revealed in scripture there has to be some way of talking about that love shared in and through profound relationships. Some believe that the reason the cosmos and humanity were created in the first place was that God wanted more people to love. The concept of the Trinity goes even further, saying that from the beginning of time the dynamic power of love and sharing love is at the heart of God's identity. God's love existed within the Godhead and overflowed into the creative act. Within Scripture itself, there is no mention of the word Trinity as such. You cannot find a verse that gives us a definition that says the Trinity is this. It is not explained, but the meaning of the Trinity is clearly described. Our passage from Romans begins after Paul has explained in Chapter 4 that we are all sinners who have fallen short of the glory and righteousness of God. God's solution is not to abandon us, but to send Jesus Christ to live among us and provide the reconciliation, the justification which through faith will bring us back into relationship with God. "All who believe are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ": Chapter 4: 24. That is the reason for the therefore which begins today's text. "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand." Paul tells us that through Jesus Christ we have access to grace. This grace is God's grace—given to us who are not worthy—God reaches out to us through Jesus Christ. It is not that we use Jesus to attain God's mercy, but God sends Jesus to enact the mercy God has intended to give from the beginning of time. Our reading from John's gospel is another description of God's out reaching toward us. "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of Truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf." The three are named here, but what is revealed is not how this relationship works, but that it is a working relationship. Each named one is part of a relationship among equals. We are invited into that relationship through faith. William Placher has written a book titled: The Triune God: An Essay on Postliberal Theology in which he states: "If, however, as I believe, we can know God only as revealed in Christ through the Holy Spirit, then we start with three." What we know is that Jesus is God's self revelation. In John's gospel Jesus says that those who have seen him, have seen the Father. I think that seeing in this case is not just with physical sight but with recognition. We know about God through knowing about Jesus as he lived among us. We know and understand about Jesus' life among us through the work of the Holy Spirit within us. According to the witness of Scripture, God's love comes to us in a three-fold way: God loved the world and gave the Son for our salvation; Jesus Christ, God's only Son our Lord, loved us and gave his life for us; and the gift of God's love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. The church's confession and praise of the triune God is rooted in this three-fold self-revelation of the one God who is our creator, redeemer, and our sanctifier. If we start with the descriptions of the text, then there is always a connection—a relationship-- found in the self-revelation. The concept of the Trinity is not about God being obtuse. Humanity it trying to pin it down and label it has done that. The Triune concept is about God revealing God's self to the world. This revelation certainly holds up the mystery of God and our inability to know God fully, to understand a love so abundant and giving that reaches out despite our rejections and rebellions. But these descriptions of God revealed to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit tell us a great deal that is trustworthy and eternal about God's character and actions.

We have been given this incredible knowledge about God—God who loves and insists on claiming us. We have been given the knowledge that glorifies Jesus Christ. Jesus says of the Holy Spirit in our text that “He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.” Using scriptural witness as the starting place when talking about the mystery that is God may not explain the doctrine of the Trinity, but it will give us all that we need to know about the Godhead whose self-revelation is a love for us that is beyond our understanding. As Paul described it as standing in God’ grace, what more do we need to know. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.