

## Trinity Matters

The Trinity is a doctrine, a claim we make about God. If you encounter Christianity, no matter the form, what denomination or place, you will encounter the Trinity. It is found deep within the architecture, the items used to designate holy places, it is a universal symbol representing Christianity. The Trinity is also something fundamental to our understanding of our faith, but have you ever tried to explain the Trinity? Or even to understand it for yourself? We proclaim God as one; that we worship one God. Yet we name God Triune, three in One which seems an unusual mathematical statement, and is considered by some a contradiction. We've got these three...and that becomes the first issue...what do we name them? Persons? Spirits? Beings? Things? Modes? Faces? Truth be told, we really aren't clear how to describe these three aspects of God without resorting to language which is so theologically technical, it doesn't help if you are trying to talk to someone not preparing to take an exam in theology...officially speaking our Triune God is..."God in three hypostatic modes of being..."whatever that really means. Careless use of the terms used leads to heresies, to not granting each aspect due equality and importance. Talking about the Trinity is not easy, but it is important because it is central to how we talk about God. If you try to find a definitive answer in scripture, you will not find the word Trinity mentioned at all. It wasn't until the fourth century, nearly 300 years after Jesus lived and died, that Christian leaders formalized the idea of the Trinity. Jesus didn't talk about the Trinity as a concept. Instead, what he did talk about was an intimate relationship—a relationship he had with a Father who sent him with a message about love and forgiveness to seek and claim people who were lost, who had wandered away from a relationship the Father had established with them. Jesus also talked about a relationship that would develop when he was no longer with them because that same Father would send an Advocate to those disciples of Jesus, the son. This Advocate, as described in the text read this morning would be a guide for the disciples and would speak and act between them and the Father and Son. It was from these relational descriptions in the transmitted narratives that the Council of Nicaea formulated the concept of the Trinity which gave us the affirmation of faith known as the Nicene Creed. If it was just that tradition, how we talk about God, about the fact that we use what is known as the Trinitarian formula...to close prayers, to give blessings...to perhaps add weight to what we believe...then the title of this sermon might be debated. The Trinity might not matter, might not be important today. But the Trinity is not only how we speak of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, within the context of our worship, it is how we think of God within the relationship and experience we have with God as individual and as a family of faith. When we think of God the Father as we read scripture, we think of God who creates; God who loves the world. When we think of Christ, we think of the Son who came and dwelled among us as Jesus of Nazareth; Emmanuel. Christ, the risen Lord, who loves us all, who came seeking the lost, offering forgiveness, suffered and sacrificed for us. We read of Jesus who revealed to us by his life and ministry how we should love one another because it was how he loved us. When we think of the Holy Spirit, we think of the presence among us who comes to comfort and guide, who is the still small voice in our times of grief and need. These are the moments when the revealed Trinity matters. Throughout history, ever since the doctrine of the Trinity was presented by

theologians, there have been attempts to explain it. There have been numerous—really almost an unlimited number of metaphors and analogies made—supposedly from the Shamrock first attributed to Saint Patrick to a modern presentation of fractal triangles. The three-leaf clover is one frequently presented at children's time with each child being given one, while the fractal triangles imagery drawing is more for the math nerd, but depicts the infinite number of equilateral triangles which can be drawn within an equilateral triangle. A more recent, and somewhat silly illustration for children's time involves a tube of toothpaste which has three colored stripes—it's one toothpaste with three colors. It really isn't that hard to come up with illustrations of units which have sub-units which form one unified item. That isn't the hard part about explaining the Trinity that is the Triune God. The hard part is that relational aspect...a oneness that is expressed in three unique ways, ways identifiable but yet still a unity...a relationship which is so unified that although Triune, Jesus could say that when the disciples saw him they saw the Father, and when the Spirit of Truth came and spoke what was spoken was the word of both the Father and the Son. That is the mystery of the Trinity. Distinctness but Oneness. The Trinity matters to us today for two reasons. It matters because it shapes how we think about God in a way that is both faithful to Scripture and that faithfully imagines the depths of the Divine Reality. Scripture speaks of God with metaphors like Father and Creator. It speaks of God's self-disclosure in the life of Jesus Christ, the Son. It speaks about God as the immediate and present Holy Spirit in both the Hebrew Scriptures and in the New Testament. But it is only after Nicaea that these are interpreted as the first, second and third persons of the Trinity. Our world likes things simple. Our world even wants God simple. And of all the things that are not simple, God is the least simple! The early fathers tried very hard to do what we all try to do—we try to simplify everything. And with their best efforts, the Doctrine of the Trinity is a celebration of the triumph of the infinite hues of complexity over a monochromatic simplicity. It is the reminder that the central metaphor for God for Christians is a "diversity...encapsulated within a unity...The 18<sup>th</sup> century German mystic Gerhard Tersteegen wrote, *"A God understood, a God comprehended, is no God."* The very mysteriousness of the Trinity, what God has revealed about God's self works to guard the mystery of God while it reveals the full story of God in scripture. In affirming the Trinity, we not only remember the mystery, but we remember that we dare not simplify God. Our minds are limited and finite, they cannot possibly know all there is to know about the infinite and unlimited "God in three persons, blessed Trinity, that we worship and celebrate on this Trinity Sunday. A favorite illustration of this point for me is related about one of Christianity's most famous theologians and bishops, Augustine, who lived in North Africa in the fourth and fifth century. As the story has it, one day Augustine was walking along the beach by the ocean and pondering the deep mystery of God the Holy Trinity. He met a boy there on the beach who had dug a hole in the sand and kept busy running back and forth from the hole to the ocean; collecting water and pouring it into the hole. Augustine was curious about this, so he asked the boy: "What are you doing?" The boy replied: "I'm going to pour the entire ocean into this hole." Augustine then said: "That is impossible, the whole ocean will not fit into your hole." And the boy answered Augustine: "Neither can the infinite God the Holy Trinity fit into your finite mind." So the Trinity matters because it reminds us that God is infinite; beyond our understanding. But the Trinity also matters because it shapes—or at least it should shape—what we think matters in life. Because the Trinity is God's self revelation about what God's deems important about

relationships---intimacy, love, inter-relationship. God understood as Trinity is by definition a Divine Reality who passionately and tirelessly longs for relationship. God the Father entered history to speak to Israel in the drama of the Hebrew Scriptures. God the Redeemer reached out to us in Jesus Christ, a human person like us. God the Sustainer is present with us in the Holy Spirit. This is a God whose every act is an outward extension of the Divine Self, a reaching out of the Divine Being toward humanity in love. The mystery of God...the abounding grace and abundant love revealed through scripture is a Triune God who we will never understand but can always know will eternally seek to love and be in relationship with us. Thanks be to our God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.