

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt  
Holy Trinity Sunday - Year A  
St. Paul's Lutheran Church  
Genesis 1:1-2:4a  
Psalm 8  
II Corinthians 13:11-13  
Matthew 28:16-20  
06/04/2023

### **Gospel**

The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew:

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

The Gospel of Our Lord

### **Prayer**

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

### **The Trinity!**

Good morning! Holy Trinity Sunday is my favorite service of the whole year. Most people think I'm joking, because traditionally, it's a Sunday most pastors would rather skip altogether. Worship leaders that have been charged with a children's sermon on this day quake in fear,

knowing that the threat of heresy, that is getting the doctrine of the Trinity incorrect, looms ever before them. It seems that whatever analogy is used always ends up being incorrect.

Trying to define and explain the Trinity is a challenging task. Don't believe me? Martin Luther said this as a caution to any trying to reason and understand it completely: *"We should live in this simplicity and not venture forth on this deep tremendously vast sea of dispute about such questions. For this article is very slippery... If reason disturbs you here and questions arise like...: Are there, then two gods? Answer: There is only one God... How is this possible? Respond with humility: I do not know."*<sup>1</sup>

Do you need proof? Let's cover a few of the most popular ones. How about the old faithful "the Trinity is like water, it can exist in three parts, liquid, ice, and steam." But my friends, this is what we call modalism. Modalism is the non-Christian belief that God is one person who works in three forms or "modes." These modes operate one at a time, rather than all at once.

Now I could go on and on for days dissecting all the children's sermon analogies and why they're wrong, but I think we would all get bored pretty quickly. But what I think this illustrates is that we have created a weird system where lay people are afraid to say ANYTHING for fear that they be labeled a heretic. So we talk less and less about the Trinity, sending candidates to seminary with less and less exposure, creating a cycle where the Trinity is often neglected or forgotten. Karl Rahner, a Catholic theologian from the twentieth century famously wrote that "... *should the*

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<sup>1</sup> Plass, Ewald M. *What Luther Says: A Practical In-Home Anthology for the Active Christian*, 2006. p. 1387.

*doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged.”<sup>2</sup>*

All of this happened quite naturally though. As the church grew in its understanding of God's work, they met and hashed out the theology of the church that we know today. It was the Council of Nicea and Council of Constantinople that really hammered down the creeds that proclaimed what we believe. At the Council of Constantinople the Nicene Creed was expanded and the church settled some theological questions about the nature of God. *“They distinguished the meaning of abstract terms such as person and substance as applied to the Trinity. Henceforth everyone agreed to say that the divine substance was the nature that the Father, Son, and Spirit have as God, no one of them more so than the others. But this divine substance, the Godhead, has three distinct and separate manners of being. Each of these is really and truly God and hence can be called a person, marked by its distinctive qualities. Though these qualities do make for an ordering of the three, this is simply in respect to their particular qualities (for example, the Father begetting the Son, or the Spirit being sent by the Father) and not in respect of their divinity. One person of the Trinity is not ‘more God’ than another.”<sup>3</sup>*

But one of the problems is that the way we define “person” in English is much different from how it was understood in Latin and ancient Greek. Now, in English, a person is an individual, they have autonomy and exist as their own. This wasn't what was intended 1,800 years ago, and as time has gone on, we've only made it more and more confusing. Another famous scholar summarized the problem perfectly, writing: *“In the course of time*

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<sup>2</sup> Rahner, Karl. *The Trinity*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1970. pp. 10-11.

<sup>3</sup> Hollerich, Michael J. 2008. *The Christian Theological Tradition*. Pearson College Division. 2008. p. 168.

*the biblical story of encounter with God —the story of the personal God of Israel encountered in the concrete life and destiny of Jesus of Nazareth and present through the Spirit in the life of the church and the world — was transposed into an abstract, complex, literal, and oppressive trinitarian theology. No wonder it has not inspired Christian life and piety with any great dynamism.”*<sup>4</sup>

Somehow, along the way we lost what was so important about how we understood God to begin with. It became a purely academic exercise, rather than real experience. But I think we can reclaim it. Because it’s important to remember that the Trinity isn’t a quick way for us to use an analogy for how God exists, the Trinity IS God. So let’s jump back to the 300’s and start with an explanation that I think can actually help. Augustine, you know, THAT Augustine, had a way of explaining the Trinity. He “... *distinguished the Persons in terms of internal relations within a person (e.g. memory, will, and intelligence).*”<sup>5</sup> This is satisfying enough that I think it appeases our curiosity and allows us to move on to more fertile ground.

What I have always felt was the most important part of the Trinity is that it is an invitation. It’s a relationship of perfect love that exists between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. God exists as community, a community with joy and fulfillment that was so perfect that God HAD to give us a taste. Another common description for the Trinity is a dance, and this Trinitarian dance sweeps across the floor inviting all around to join in and take part.

If it wasn’t so important it wouldn't have been argued about so much! At the heart of the creeds is a deeply passionate belief that God has revealed

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<sup>4</sup> Johnson, Elizabeth A. 2018. *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*. New York ; London ; Oxford ; New Delhi ; Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic. p. 209.

<sup>5</sup> Hardy, Edward Rochie, ed. *The Library of Christian Classics: Christology of the Later Fathers*. Vol. III. Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1954. p. 244.

Godself to us as three-in-one. It's a relationship that forces us to look at the world with unselfish eyes. We look around and instead of seeing strangers, instead of seeing the Other, we see partners in a dance that has been going on since the beginning of time. This outlook flies in the face of that scare tactic you see from some Christians who shout things like "where would you go if you died today?!" Instead of threatening others we shout for joy as the dance goes on, grabbing the hands of loved ones, friends and family, who have not yet joined the dance because they're missing out!

The Trinity isn't a scary topic we should avoid, but a thing to embrace and be changed forever. And so we return once again to Augustine, who finished his writings about the Trinity like this: *"So were it better to bring this Book at last to an end, not with argument, but with prayer. O Lord our God, we believe in thee, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If thou wert not Trinity, the Truth would not have said: 'Go ye, baptize all nations in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...'"*<sup>6</sup> Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Madges, William. *God and the World*. Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1999. p. 45.