

**“THE TRINITY – WHAT’S IT TO US”  
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**May 18, 2008 – Trinity Sunday**

**SCRIPTURE TEXTS: 2 CORINTHIANS 13: 11-13, MATTHEW 28: 16-20**

For many Christians the doctrine of the Trinity is the most obscure and confusing teaching of the church. The idea of God as “three persons in one God” seems to defy logic and common sense. On the surface this doctrine appears to be inconsequential for daily Christian faith and practice.

The story is related of a pastor who faced the task of preaching on Trinity Sunday with fear and trepidation. He resolved this problem by informing his congregation that the Trinity was such a great mystery that in honor of it, there would be no sermon that morning! On no! You should be so lucky. Unfortunately, you’re stuck with me this Trinity Sunday morning!

Despite widespread opinions and debate about its meaning, the doctrine of the Trinity represents the distinctive Christian understanding of God. This perception of God is observed in Christian prayer and worship; we baptize in the name of the triune God. We bless in the name of the triune God. In our opening hymn today we have sung praises to the triune God. This concept is upheld in the classical creeds and confessions of the Church. This formulation is a summary of the Christian gospel derived from the Scriptures and believers’ experiences.

Houston Smith, one of the premier teachers of world religions in his book, *The Soul of Christianity* asks the question: “What prompted the early Christians to adopt this atypical view that God is three-in-one?” - - - As always in such matters, the idea was anchored in experience and gave voice to it. It was not until the fourth century that that voice was set definitely in place, but the experiences that prompted it began in the early church. Indeed, those experiences generated the church.”

How did this happen? The New Testament witness to the reality and power of God is clearly Trinitarian. Jesus Christ, his ministry, death and resurrection are clearly the center of the gospel message. Yet the person and work of Jesus cannot be understood fully apart from his relationship to God the Father on the one hand and his relationship to the Spirit of God on the other hand. The Scriptures declare that as God’s beloved Son from eternity, Jesus loves and freely obeys the Father who sent him on his redemptive mission. Moreover, Jesus uniquely bears God’s eternal Spirit and sends the Spirit from the Father to the disciples to empower their ministry in his name. The gospel is told in these Trinitarian terms – God loves the world so much that he gave his only Son to redeem it (John 3:16); Jesus Christ the Son of God freely emptied himself and became a servant for our salvation through death on the cross (Phil 2:5f); the Spirit of resurrection power (Rom. 8:11) who comes from the Father and the Son

moves freely in the world to transform and direct it toward God's new world of justice and peace.

Daniel Migliore, professor of Systematic Theology at Princeton Seminary reflects, "The doctrine of the Trinity is simply the effort of the church – in language which is true but inevitably inadequate – to affirm what God is really like in the light of God's unique presence in Jesus the crucified and risen Lord and in the coming of the Holy Spirit. We do not engage in wild speculation when we call God triune. On the contrary, we simply confess that God has been revealed to us in this way – as a Trinity of self-giving, other affirming, community-forming love."

What then does this mean for us in our understanding of God's power and our related discipleship? We love and worship a God not as absolute power, but as shared power, transforming power, power that makes for just and inclusive community. In faithfulness to the whole gospel account of Jesus the crucified and risen Lord, when we call God triune we are pointing to several truths about the eternal reality of God.

First, this doctrine attests that the one God who created the heavens and the earth cannot be separated from the crucified and risen Jesus or from his renewing Spirit. According to the New Testament accounts we know God as the Father who loves and sends the Son; as the Son who loves and obeys the Father; as the Spirit who is sent by the Father and the Son to draw us into their relationship. The one God is the faithful Father, the servant Son, and the enlivening, transforming Spirit. We as Christians confess that God is a living reality and personal in three ways which are not accidental but rooted in the eternal being of God. Our God acts and abides in personal relationships based on God's own being in all eternity. God is eternally love, and that love means being with and for others.

Second, this doctrine reveals God's nature as communal rather than uniform or inflexible. There are differences within the living unity of God – these distinct persons are affirmed in relationship for the purpose of community, of mutual love and friendship given and received in bonds respecting the difference. The scriptural and Trinitarian God is not the will to power but the will to communion in freedom.

Professor Migliore observes, "God is not absolute force that crushes all opposition but the power of peaceful coexistence, the will to be with and for others, the spirit of solidarity that creates and sustains life in just and fruitful relationships. Community arises when persons are in free, reciprocal, affirming relationship with one another. - - - As Father, Son, and Spirit, God exists in communion and is the source of true community." Of course, the communion of the triune God is far deeper and complex than anything we may experience in our relationships with others.

Thirdly, the enigma of God in three persons describes God as the power of self-giving love. This is the fullest meaning of God's life-in-relationship: God is love, not a dead idol who cannot love or enter into communion with and freely suffer for another. The true God is alive and gives life to others understood through the crucified and risen Son and the work of the Spirit.

The truth of God's presence in the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus transforms the meaning of the power of God. Out of love, God freely suffers for the salvation of others. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from his prison cell, "only a suffering God can help." Only a God who knows the suffering and affliction of the human race to the utmost extent can help us. Only such a God can liberate us from the world's destructive corruption of power, can reconcile us to God and our fellow creatures, and can promise new life in the midst of death.

This suffering God is the triune God. Only the trinitarian view of God consistently, unambiguously affirms that God, the creator and Lord of all, experiences the deepest pain of human suffering, abandonment, and death for the sake of our salvation. The doctrine of the Trinity expresses what we know of God in the light of the crucified Son who was raised to new life in the power of the Spirit. Jesus in crying, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15: 34) does so on behalf of all humanity and creation. But his cry is also the lament of God, who in his Son goes to the depths of human brokenness and suffering making it his own. The crucified Jesus is the ultimate embodiment of the triune God's costly love for the world. All of the world's pain and suffering are taken into the life of God on the cross. In the incarnation and its culmination in the crucifixion, God the Father gives the Son to the world out of love. Father and Son are bound together by the Spirit of this costly love, and the Spirit radiates this love throughout the creation, moving people to repentance and faith, creating in them a new freedom and joy, inciting them to pray, to resist evil powers, to give themselves in service God's coming reign of justice, liberation and peace throughout the creation

We need to ask ourselves if this understanding of God's power of self-giving love revealed in the trinitarian perspective affects the way we view ourselves and our perspective of the world? How does the power of God who creates, saves, and renews impact our everyday living and faith practice? According to the Apostle Paul the gifts of God are faith, hope, and love. (1 Cor. 13:13) This grace from God brings us to our true humanity, and by the working of the Holy Spirit, we are empowered and called to new freedom and responsibility in relationship to God and neighbors.

Let us begin with what it means to have faith in God – faith is letting God be God and trusting in the Lord as revealed by Jesus Christ and at work in this world by his Spirit. Faith is relying on God alone as the loving power who has created us, who forgives us, and who transforms us for service on God's behalf for others. Faith is not only the thankful acceptance of God's forgiveness but also the beginning of a life forgiving others and the power of new beginnings. When the gift of forgiveness is actually lived out, the outcome is amazing.

In October, 2006, the Amish community of Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, confounded many Americans and the mass media by forgiving the gunman who entered a schoolhouse in their town and murdered five young Amish Girls. As the entire community dealt with its grief, the gunman's wife was graciously welcomed at the girls' funeral service. One Amish woman declared, "If you have Jesus in your

heart and he has forgiven you - - how can you not forgive other people?" It sounds simple, but would it have been our attitude if one of our children had been a victim in that schoolhouse?

Theologian Mirslav Volf explains, "The practice of forgiveness is a participation in and reflection of the creative and redemptive power of God and bears witness to God's power of forgiveness and reconciliation, and new life in relationship with others that it makes possible."

The Apostle Paul also states that the virtue of love is the greatest of God's gifts. (1 Cor. 13) If the story of Jesus is correctly understood, it says clearly that love is first of all the gifts of God in Christ and only then a command that Jesus gives us. (Mark 12: 30, 31) We love because God first loves us. Because we receive and accept God's love, we respond by loving God and others. The power to love comes from beyond ourselves, and the practice of love is a life-long process under the tutelage of God's Spirit. This love finds on-going expression in actions of hospitality to strangers. This begins at the communion table where the reconciling work of Christ is remembered and reaches out in the mission of the Church in a world of aliens, immigrants, and strangers. True Christian community reflects and celebrates the diversity of life that God has created and redeemed. God's own welcoming love empowers the church to show acceptance to those who are different. The gifts of the Spirit are not intended to form a closed group bound together by a sense of superiority and self-promotion. Rather, these gifts should increase our sensitivity to others, especially those who are different from us and perhaps initially suspected as threats – the stranger, the immigrant, the handicapped, the poor, the politically or culturally oppressed, all those pushed to the margins of society for whatever reasons. Christian growth demonstrates itself in the readiness to help in the building up of new inclusive human community. The church is called to be for others, to reach out to others out of the strong passion of the triune God for a world of justice, freedom and peace. The test of our Christian faith is more than just belief – it is the test of faithful behavior in the practice of love in hospitality to all neighbors.

The final gift of faith is hope which is the eager expectation of the transformation of all things by God. This gift too is freely received and lived out in the everyday. Christians dare to hope in the power of the crucified and risen Lord whose grace is stronger than all the powers of destruction and death in our world. Because the crucified Son is risen and his transforming Spirit is at work in the world today, Christians hope for the coming assured triumph of God over all evil. This is the voice of hope in God that refuses to become resigned to the way things are, to say in despair, "What's the use? Things will never change."

The strong love of God in Jesus Christ is the unshakable foundation of Christian hope. (Rom. 8:35, 37-39) The action of Christian hope is the practice of prayer and working for God's coming kingdom. The Lord's Prayer is a prayer of radical hope in God. Such hope is inclusive, enfolding people in the past, present, and future – never

conceding the final victory to death. This hope embraces both humanity and the whole creation.

Perhaps the most eloquent expression of daring human hope in the past century is the speech of Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered in Washington, D.C. in August, 1963, entitled "I Have a Dream." King had a global vision of justice and peace. He dreamed of an end to racial discrimination and the exploitation of the poor. In his dream he saw a time when free men and women, of all colors, cultures, and national origins, would live in harmony with one another. The dream that King shared with millions of people for which he struggled non-violently until felled by an assassin's bullet was profound and moving. The "God of Hope" inspires such vision. In so doing, Christians are called to bear witness to the "more excellent way" of love. (1 Cor. 12:31)

Finally, let me conclude: a Christian trusts, a Christian loves, a Christian hopes. In and through it all, a Christian continually prays (1 Thess. 5:17) as participation in the different power of the triune God. In prayer we give thanks that the omnipotent love of God, embodied decisively in Jesus Christ and at work in us and in the world here and now by the Holy Spirit, is greater than all the kingdoms and powers of this world. In prayer we learn patience and to wait on God even while working for the promised kingdom in faithful obedience to our calling in Christ. In prayer we receive new strength to continue the struggle for justice and freedom, for a more peaceful world. This is human power reshaped by the altogether different power of the triune God – the Father Almighty, the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. To this God we gladly ascribe "the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever." That's what the Trinity is to us.

Amen

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