

# THE TRINITY

Matthew 3:13-17

Second Wednesday in Lent (Series C)

March 13, 2019

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 3, verses 13 through 17. In this gospel lesson, we have a picture of the Trinity at work. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 3, beginning at verse 13, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>13</sup> Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. <sup>14</sup> John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" <sup>15</sup> But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. <sup>16</sup> And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; <sup>17</sup> and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*  
You may be seated.

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

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Who is God? That has to be about the most basic theological question there is. Who is God? There are several ways people try to answer this question.

Some will try to answer it philosophically. They might say, "God is that which nothing greater than can be thought" (Anselm). We could define him simply as the greatest power we can possibly imagine or as the greatest force in all the universe. This leads us to think of God in terms of his attributes, particularly the ones we find most impressive, like how he is all-powerful, all-knowing, all-present, eternal, sovereign, and just. This might all be true, but it's a very limited way of defining God. It would be kind of like defining your parents simply as those people who are bigger than you, smarter than you, and who possess authority over you. It might be true, but it's very impersonal. If you go up to a kid and say, "Excuse me, who is your dad?" The kid's probably not going to say, "Oh, he's bigger than me and tells me what to do." It might be true, but it's a very impersonal way of defining your dad. In the same way, if we define God simply according to his powerful attributes, we might be speaking truthfully, but it would be a very limited and impersonal definition. This, however, is the way most religions in the world define God. He's big and powerful.

Or we could define God according to our creative imaginations. Someone might say, "My god is this statue I carved out of a piece of wood." Or, "God is the feeling I get when I watch a really great sunset." Or, "God is a rainbow unicorn who gives me fruit snacks and flies me around to theme parks in the clouds." These creative definitions have the potential to seem more personal and intimate, but they lack any basis in reality. And if something isn't real, it can't actually be personal and intimate.

The Christian definition transcends all these, because the Christian definition affirms God's powerful attributes, its basis is in reality, and it is also personal. It is not something we dreamed up; it is not something we philosophized; it is something that has been revealed to us. More than that, it is *someone* who has revealed himself to us. The Christian definition of God leads us not merely to know *about* God, but to know him *personally*, because God has revealed his person,

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or, I suppose we should say, God has revealed his *persons* to us. God has revealed himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

By revealing his personhood to us, and not merely his attributes, God has made himself personal and intimate to us. Not only do we know *about* him; but we know *him*. If you ask a child who his father is, he's going to say something like, "My dad is so and so." He'll give you his dad's name. That's because the father is a real person whom the child knows. And if someone asks you—a Christian—who God is, don't get philosophical, and don't start listing his attributes. That might be appropriate later when they ask you what God is like. But first, tell them God's name. The Christian answer to, "Who is God?" is, "God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

We call this the doctrine of the Trinity, and this is the first great mystery of the Christian faith. The second great mystery is the two natures of Jesus Christ. That is, that Jesus is true God and true man. We'll discuss that mystery two weeks from tonight.

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For these midweek Lenten services, that is, for the five Wednesdays between Ash Wednesday and Holy Week, we're going to be discussing the Apostles' Creed. It's an old tradition in the Lutheran Church to devote midweek sermons to teaching the catechism. Last year we covered the Ten Commandments, and so the next part to cover is the creed.

So these five weeks will cover the basic teachings of the Christian faith. Now, maybe you're thinking, *Oh, great, he's going to tell us stuff we already know*. Maybe. For your sake, I hope you do know all of this already. But maybe you don't. And even if you do, it's worth being reminded again. It may be foundational, but it's not the kind of foundation we can put out of our minds as we grow in the Christian faith. The creed is the kind of foundation that we are always building on and always returning to.

The Apostles' Creed is divided into three sections: The first article, "Of Creation," describes the primary work of the Father. The second article, "Of Redemption," describes the primary work of the Son. And the third article, "Of Sanctification," describes the primary work of the Holy Spirit. So those three articles will each get a midweek service, and to round it up to the number five, we'll also spend a week each on the Trinity and on the two natures of Jesus Christ. This week: the Trinity.

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The basic truth of the Trinity is that there is one God, and there are three persons who make up this God. They each possess the fullness of the Godhead. They are equal in power, wisdom, love, glory, majesty, honor, etc., etc. And all three members are eternal. And it's not that each one makes up one third of God. They are each fully God. They are distinct persons, who each possess the fullness of deity, and they are united in one Godhead. They each share the same divine nature. The simplest way I can put it is this: one God, three persons, and each person is fully God.

There are, however, distinctions between them in regard to their relationships to one another. There is a hierarchy within the Trinity, even though they are equal. The Son is subordinate to the Father. And this does not imply inferiority; they are still equal; there is simply an order to their relationship. And the Holy Spirit proceeds both from the Father and the Son. Together the Father and the Son send him to us, so the Holy Spirit is subordinate to the Father and the Son, but is not inferior to them.

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Being God means that one is infinite in power, wisdom, love, glory, majesty, honor, etc., etc. The nature of God is infinite, and one cannot be sort-of infinite. So there is an order to the relationships between them, but the divine nature is the same.

If this is confusing for you, perhaps an analogy will help. The problem, however, is that the Trinity is a mystery beyond human comprehension, and there are no helpful analogies. For two thousand years now, theologians have been trying to come up with an accurate analogy to describe the Trinity. No one has succeeded. There is nothing else in all the universe that is one thing, yet also three distinct things at the same time, while all three distinct things possess the full nature of the one thing. Outside of the Trinity, such a thing does not exist. So if anyone ever tries to give you an analogy of the Trinity, it is appropriate to shout, "Heresy!" before they even tell you what the analogy is.

But, while the analogies fail to accurately describe the Trinity, they are extremely successful in teaching us what the Trinity is not. And this can actually be quite helpful, because it can identify and correct false ideas we have of the Trinity. I'll give you a couple bad analogies and help you see what's wrong with them.

One popular analogy is to an apple. An apple is one thing, yet it has three parts: the core, the tasty fruit, and the skin. What's wrong with this analogy? The three parts don't all have the same nature, and don't each possess the fullness of the apple. This heresy is called "partialism." It denies that each member of the Trinity is fully God. Analogies to triangles or three-leaf clovers are also partialism.

Another popular analogy is to water. Water is one substance, and it always maintains the quality of being H<sub>2</sub>O, but it can take three different forms: vapor, liquid, and ice. So sometimes God appears as Father, other times as the Son, and other times as the Holy Spirit. What's wrong with this analogy? While it maintains the singular nature of the Godhead, it limits him to one person at a time. This heresy is called "modalism." The idea is that God takes on different modes. We could also call it "Clark Kentism." It's sort of like how Clark Kent and Superman are the same person, but appear in different forms, this heresy denies the three distinct persons of God. This heresy is easily refuted by the account of Jesus' baptism, which we read from *The Gospel of Matthew*. There all three persons of the Trinity appear together as the Holy Spirit descends on the Son while the Father speaks from heaven. Even Superman can't divide into three persons.

Different analogies might capture a part of the truth of the Trinity, but in doing so, they always end up denying another part. So it's better to simply remember the basic revelation of Scripture, that there is one God, three persons, and each person is fully God.

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Now the doctrine of the Trinity is taught in many places in Scripture. Most of the references are in the New Testament, but not all of them. Even in the Old Testament, and from the very beginning of the Old Testament, that is, in the account of creation, we see the multiple personhood of God as the Spirit hovers over the waters (Gen. 1:2) and when God says, "Let us make man in our image" (Gen. 1:26). From the very beginning of the Scriptures we see that God is one, and yet he is multiple persons.

The word "trinity" never appears in the Bible, but the concept is clearly taught. As you read through the Bible, you will see several places where it is revealed that there is only one God. You will also see several places where God is revealed to be a plurality of persons. And if you make a list of these persons who are revealed to be God, you will come up with three: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You won't come up with two, and you won't come up with four. You will

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come up with three, and exactly three, and they will be these three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We see this in all three of the Scripture readings this evening. And I intentionally chose passages that are not used for Trinity Sunday in order to demonstrate that the Trinity is revealed in many different places.

We already noted the distinction in the gospel lesson, where the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus as the Father speaks from heaven, declaring Jesus to be his own Son. Now we'll take a brief look at the Old Testament and epistle lessons.

In the Old Testament lesson from Isaiah 63, God identifies himself to be Father when he claims the people of Israel as his children (63:8). Then it speaks of how God became their Savior, and the personhood of the Savior is made distinct from that of the Father when he is revealed as "the angel of his presence" (63:9). Then the third person is revealed by name as God's "Holy Spirit" (63:10, 11). There are other Old Testament passages that make a clearer distinction between the Father and the Son, but this one helps us by distinguishing between all three persons.

And in the epistle lesson from 1 John 4, we see a distinction between persons as God sends his only Son into the world (4:9). So we see that God is both Father and Son. And then there is a very clear distinction between all three persons in verses 13 and 14. Listen again to this: "By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his *Spirit*. And we have seen and testify that the *Father* has sent his *Son* to be the Savior of the world."

In these and many other passages we see the one God revealed in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is the first great mystery of the Christian faith.

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Now you might be thinking, *So what?* That's interesting, and maybe a bit confusing. I hope you see it as more marvelous and mysterious than simply confusing. But you might also be thinking, *So what? What difference does it make to me that God is three persons in one Godhead?* One of my goals as a pastor is to help you see that all theology is practical. It matters to us.

At least part of the way this applies to us is that the truth of the Trinity is essential to God's love. "God is love." This is his primary attribute. He still has other attributes. God is all-powerful, God is all-knowing, God is eternal, etc., etc. That is all true. But his primary attribute is love. We learn this from the epistle lesson in John 4, where it says, "God is love" (4:8). I can't think of another place in Scripture where a certain attribute is so clearly equated with God. They might say that God is powerful, or that God is sovereign, but they don't equate God with the noun. They don't say, "God is power," or, "God is sovereignty." But the attribute of love is applied to God in this way. It's not just, "God is loving." It's, "God is love." Love is the supreme manifestation of God's nature.

And in order for God to love, there has to be a Trinity. There is a possibility this might fly over your heads, but I think you're smart people, so I'm going to give it a shot. Here's the thing: if God were only one person, he could not have been love before the creation of the world, because there wouldn't have been another person to love. See what I mean? In order to love, there has to be another person there for you to love. Love is not simply a feeling or just an attitude. Love is always an action for the benefit of another person. So if God were only one person, he wouldn't have had anyone to love in eternity past, and, thus, he could not have been love. Love always needs an object. But if there are multiple persons of the Godhead, say, for

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instance, three, then each member of the Trinity has two objects of their love before the world is even created. So the Trinity is essential for God to actually be love.

But the Trinity is not only essential for the love of God within the Godhead, it is also essential for the love God has for us. And this has to do with the way we are saved. And this, I suppose, is the most practical aspect of the doctrine of the Trinity. So if you've been waiting for it, here it is: in order for God to save us, he has to be more than one person. Our problem as human beings is that we are sinful, and we fall under the wrath of God. So, in God's justice, it is good, and right, and necessary for him to punish sin. So the only way to save us is to take our place and bear our sin for us. This is what God did by sending his Son for us (1 John 4:10). In order to save us, God must be both the one who punishes sin and the one who bears that punishment. Therefore, it is necessary for God to be more than one person. There must be a Father to pour out the wrath of God, and there must be a Son to absorb that wrath. And in order for the Son to be a willing sacrifice, and not just some helpless victim, he must also be of one mind with the Father. It is actually necessary for our salvation and for the forgiveness of our sins that God is distinct persons who are united in one Godhead.

The doctrine of the Trinity is not some trivial piece of information. Wrapped up in the doctrine of the Trinity is everything about God and what he has done for us. We will explore this throughout the rest of the season of Lent. The doctrine of the Trinity reveals what God did to create you, what he continues to do to preserve your physical body, what he did to redeem you and forgive your sins, what he is currently doing to preserve you in the Christian faith, and what he will do to raise you on the Last Day, transform you in body and soul, and grant you everlasting life. All of this is wrapped up in the doctrine of the Trinity, because it reveals who God is, and how he loves. He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And he manifests his love for you as these three persons in one Godhead. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.