

## THE HOLY TRINITY | MAY 30, 2021

ISAIAH 6:1-8 | PSALM 29 | ROMANS 8:12-17 | JOHN 3:1-17

There are two big problems with the Trinity. The first one is that it's a bit of a stretch to understand conceptually. What we would call the doctrine of the capital-T Trinity emerged in the fourth century, and it basically says that God is "one in essence, distinguished in three persons."<sup>1</sup> That's simple enough, but when you get beyond that, it starts to get a little complicated. And it gets even more complicated because we're bouncing between Greek and Latin and English, and at some point you feel like you just need to lie down.<sup>2</sup> We're not going to get into that today.

But we are going to get into the other problem with the Trinity. Why should anyone care? Even if you can understand it conceptually, why should you? Wouldn't that brain space be put to better use by memorizing the Mets' schedule or something?

Well, it helps to remember here that the Trinity emerges from people trying to make sense out of their experiences. If you read the Hebrew Bible, you hear over and over again that God is one. The Shema is a famous prayer from the Hebrew Bible that begins, "Hear, O Israel, the LORD your God is one."<sup>3</sup> But the experience of the New Testament writers was that God couldn't be understood or explained without reference to Jesus.<sup>4</sup> And you couldn't understand what God had done in Jesus without reference to the Holy Spirit.<sup>5</sup> And so they're trying to come up with some coherent way to talk about how God has acted throughout history.

And it's that word that I want us to focus in on today. *Act*. Not just who God is in theory, but how does God act in our lives. Where do those acts come from? And what are those acts for?

When we say that God is Trinity, "one in essence, three in persons," we're saying that there is no discord, no friction, and no conflict in God. That God is pure love. There's a Catholic theologian who used to sum it up by saying, "God loves being God."

So whenever God acts, God acts out of love. That when God loves us, it isn't because we're lovable, but because the love that is the very heart of God's being is overflowing into creation and our lives. As John's Jesus so beautifully puts it in today's gospel reading, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." The key point there is that God acts from love.

In fact you could imagine putting that phrase in front of every promise God makes in our worship. Because God loves, your sins are forgiven. Because God loves, word of God. Because God loves, the body of Christ given for you. Because God loves, go in peace. And you could expand it from there to every part of our lives. Because God loves, a new day. Because God loves, new relationships. Because God loves, new beginnings. Whenever God acts, God is always acting from love.

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<sup>1</sup> If you want some background on the disagreements that led up to those councils, William G. Rusch, *The Trinitarian Controversy* (Fortress Press, 1980) has a good summary in the introduction.

<sup>2</sup> There's a nice little summary of the translation debates in Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *The Trinity: Global Perspectives* (Presbyterian Publishing Corp, 2007), 38. The point is basically that we're not just arguing over the Trinity, we're arguing over what the words we use to describe the Trinity mean.

<sup>3</sup> There's an interesting explication of the Shema here: "Va'etchanan (5770) - The Meanings of Shema," *Rabbi Sacks* (blog), July 24, 2010, <https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-5770-vaetchanan-the-meanings-of-shema/>.

<sup>4</sup> See the prologue of John's gospel. Hebrews 1:2 as well.

<sup>5</sup> St. Paul draws a very tight identification between Christ and the Spirit in Romans 8. "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you." You can't talk about one without talking about the other.

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This probably sounds pretty obvious, *God loves, what else is new?*, but it's not the only option. We know it's possible to act from other places. All of our actions come from somewhere. Sometimes we act from a place of fear. We try to avoid uncertainty, and so we close ourselves off to anything that isn't what we're used to. We'd rather assure failure in a way that's comfortable than risk succeeding in a new way.

Sometimes we act out of shame. When we feel like we're the wrong sort of person or undeserving of respect, we close ourselves off from others. Shame makes it harder to trust because when we don't love ourselves, we think others can't love us either.

Sometimes we act out of resentment. It isn't enough for me to be right, but you have to be humiliated. Resentment is probably the one I worry about most here at church. Because it takes people who are thoughtful and generous and makes them impossibly cruel.

What all of those have in common is they're reactive. So often the place we act from is determined by others. We react from our fear of the world outside. We react from what we think others think of us. We react from perceived slights at the hands of others. And when we react to others, we let them set the agenda.

But the love of God isn't like that. It isn't reactive. It isn't just responding to some other force. It isn't just rushing around putting out fires. It animates and sustains itself.<sup>6</sup> The love of God is, as our opening hymn put it, the energy that never tires. It's always there, animating our lives and sustaining our community. That love is what we act from. That love is what we live from. That love is what we draw from.

And that love is what we act for. That divine life of loving communion that we encounter in Father, Son, and Spirit is what we believe God intends for all creation.<sup>7</sup> When we pray that people would experience the divine life, that's what we're praying for. That they would experience life as God experiences it. Life that has integrity. Life that has support. Life that is animated by love.

To confess that God is Trinity is to say that God empowers us to live in relationships of reciprocity, where our flourishing is bound up in one another's flourishing. The reason we work for equity and justice is so more people might experience life as a reflection of God's loving communion. We reject misogyny, racism, nationalism and homophobia as sinful is because they are idolatrous. They inject our own divisions and biases into God's perfect communion. They bring hatred into a community sustained by love.

That image is perfectly captured in one of my favorite hymns about the Trinity. "Great God, Your Love Has Called Us Here." We would usually sing this on Maundy Thursday, it has a line about towels, so it gets put in that section, but it has this beautiful phrase at the beginning that sums up what life in Trinity is all about. "Great God, your love has called us here, as we, by love, for love were made." We, by love, for love were made.

That's really what it means to confess God as Trinity. Not to recite a definition. Not to memorize some theory. But to trust God's promise that we were created by love in the beginning. And we are created for love at the end. With God, Father, Son, and Spirit, we too act from love for love.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

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<sup>6</sup> In other words, God is "free" in the sense that God's actions aren't conditioned or contingent but given out of God's character. See Karl Barth, *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom* (Fortress Press, 1991), 54. I think there's some stuff in von Balthasar related to this, but I don't want to spend more time digging around.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004) has a good summary of some of the ethical dimensions of this.