

## THE HOLY TRINITY | JUNE 12, 2022

PROVERBS 8:1-4, 22-31 | PSALM 8 | ROMANS 5:1-5 | JOHN 16:12-15

Every once in a while, you'll hear someone say that the Trinity isn't actually in the Bible. This is, in some sense, true. What we would recognize as the doctrine of the Trinity was codified in the fourth century.<sup>1</sup> That's at least two hundred years after the last of the New Testament books were written. So if you search through the New Testament for some line about how God is "one in essence, distinguished in three persons," you're going to be looking until the New Jerusalem comes down from the heavens.

But there's another sense, a more important sense, in which that isn't true at all. The Trinity is present all throughout scripture. In fact, not only is it all over the New Testament. But the God of the Hebrew Bible is also that same Triune God.

So how can both of those things be true at the same time? Well, many of us understand the Trinity as a doctrine. It's something that exists in theory, in the abstract. When we think about the Trinity, we think about God's being. Maybe you've had that experience where your pastor comes in on Trinity Sunday with a pretzel and explains how the pretzel is both three and also one. And you don't really get it, and now you're hungry, too.

But the authors of the New Testament come at it from a different perspective. They're focused not on who God is in theory but reflecting on their own experience of God's action in history. That experience began with the God of their ancestors who created the universe, made a promise to Abraham and Sarah, and liberated the Israelites from slavery. It continued in the life of Jesus, whose life was completely transparent to the one Jesus called the "Father." There was a complete unity of purpose and action, so deep a communion that even death could not destroy it. And after Jesus was raised from the dead and ascended into heaven, his relationship with God the Father was poured out into the life of the church through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

When we say that God is Trinity, always three, ever one, we're not making some abstract statement about who God is in theory. We're telling that story about how God has acted for us throughout history.

That reading from Romans today actually gets the point across well. It doesn't use any of the magic Trinity buzzwords, but you can see Paul feeling out the edges of the language. Even if the definition isn't there, the story certainly is. We have peace with God the Father "through our Lord Jesus Christ." There's a unity of purpose between Father and Son. And the love between Father and Son "has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." The Spirit invites

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<sup>1</sup> Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople in 325 and 381.

us into that divine relationship that can never be exhausted. When we say that God is Triune, we are proclaiming that God is God *for us*.

And not only does God act *for us*, but God acts *for us* in a very particular way. God always acts as Trinity. Sometimes we talk about the Trinity as if its members just worked on their own solo projects. The Father creates. The Son redeems. The Spirit sustains. But that's not quite right. Whenever God acts, it is always God the Father acting through the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup> That's true of the incarnation. That's true of the resurrection. That's true of the creation stories from Genesis. And that's true of the new Jerusalem from Revelation. Every act of God arises from that love in God overflowing into creation. The design of God's great love is engrained in all God's action through history. Because God is Triune, God always acts from love.

So when we confess that God is Trinity, we are not simply making a creedal statement or trying to be orthodox or avoiding being labeled a heretic. We are proclaiming the gospel. God acts *from love* and *for us*.

And more than that, God invites us into that same way of love. Which is good, because we often don't act from love. What are the motivations, the energies, the driving forces that drive our actions? Well, we act from fear. Fear of loss, fear of change, fear of difference. We act from our desire to control. To make others behave a certain way or believe a certain thing. We act from a desire for approval. To build up our egos and need satisfy our seemingly endless need for praise. And one I've been thinking about a lot recently, we act from our need to be needed. To believe that the greatest thing in life is to be indispensable.

And it's good because we often don't act for others. And who do we act for? Well, to state the obvious, we often act for ourselves. What's in it for me? What am I getting out of this? Am I better off or worse off?

And even when we do act for others, it can be easy to still view them primarily in relationship to ourselves. Many of you know that last week, we had Rev. Tim Krick here from Lutheran World Relief. And one of the things he mentioned was how generous congregations like ours had been with relief in Ukraine. But one of the challenges they face is moving that generosity into raising funds relief in places like Yemen and Indonesia and Honduras. Not because people don't care, but because many white Christians look at refugees from Ukraine and think, "That could be me." We tend to view others through our own lives.

God's action as Trinity reorganizes our way of life. The word that some early writers used for this reorganization is *theosis*, which means "becoming like God."<sup>3</sup> Athanasius, one of the great early Christian writers, once wrote that God became

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<sup>2</sup> I think this was one of Augustine's main contributions on the Trinity. In our experience, this actually goes backwards from Spirit to Son to Father.

<sup>3</sup> There's a good summary of some definitions and uses in Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung, *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (Baker Academic, 2008). Theosis, divinization, and deification get used differently and the exact distinctions are beyond the point here.

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human so that humans might become like God. Becoming like God doesn't mean you're all powerful or all knowing or all seeing. Becoming like God means that we act from love for others.

And sure enough, bound together by the gift of the Holy Spirit poured out at Pentecost, God empowers us to participate in that ongoing and inexhaustible divine life. To act from love. To be so certain of God's love and care for us, that we can act without concern for others' approval or praise or acclaim. To act as if the love of the Holy Spirit that has been, St. Paul's phrase, "poured into our hearts" might overflow into the lives of the community around us.

And so that we can act for others. That the self-giving and love that is God's very being might move out into God's beloved world. That others might be viewed with integrity in the sight of God, not just individuals who happen to be in our lives.

It's Trinity not as doctrine but Trinity as promise. Just as all God's actions bear the design of God's great love, our own life and witness might reflect the image of God.

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