

THE HOLY TRINITY | JUNE 4, 2023

GENESIS 1:1-2:4A | PSALM 47 | 2 CORINTHIANS 13:11-13 | MATTHEW 28:16-20

Back in the early church, there was a branch of theology where people would try to find examples of the Trinity in creation. If God was Triune, they thought, surely creation must have images of the Trinity latent within it. Some of the things they came up with were tactile things that you could touch. The Trinity is like a clover with three leaves or, as you might say during a children's sermon, a pretzel with three holes. Other analogies were about things you shouldn't touch. The Trinity is like coal, fire, and heat. And some analogies were more abstract, such as Augustine's famous analogy that the Trinity is like memory, understanding, and will.¹

These analogies are vivid (fire), insightful (the mind) and in some cases kind of funny (clovers), but they often leave you feeling unsatisfied and thirsting for something more (pretzels).

Orthodoxy aside, part of the reason these analogies can feel so tedious is that they're all static.² Which is interesting because when you read the stories from scripture that formed the foundation of the doctrine, they are incredibly dynamic. The authors and editors of scripture had no interest or agenda in explaining how God is one and three, but they couldn't say enough about how God invites us to participate in the divine life. And they understood that invitation as involving two distinct movements of God. And as it just so happens, we heard both of those in today's readings.

The first movement of the Trinity draws us in. When we confess God to be Triune, we're saying that God invites us to participate in God's perfect community. Today's epistle reading—which comes from the very end of 2 Corinthians—is a great example of this. The church in Corinth was a mess. We don't need to get into all the details, but it had all these different factions in it. Rich vs. poor. Jew vs. Gentile. People with one spiritual gift vs. people with a different spiritual gift. Wherever there was any sort of difference, the Corinthians would argue over which was better and who should have more prestige. And so the church was always being torn apart by people's arguments over where people were on these various hierarchies.

St. Paul's letters to the Corinthians are his attempts to get them back on track. And so you could imagine Paul ending his letter by saying, *In conclusion, please knock it off or If you would like to avoid a 3 Corinthians, please behave better.* He could appeal to some trait in these people. *This is not who we are.* But that's not what he does. He appeals to God's character. *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.*

He says that God is boundless grace, unending love, and perfect communion. And that by raising Jesus from the dead and pouring the Holy Spirit into our hearts, God empowers us to reflect that grace, love, and communion in our own lives. In other words, don't focus on yourself and what status or privilege you're bringing to this community. Focus on who God is forming you to be.

You see this in Paul's admonition that the Corinthians need to start "putting things in order."³ This sounds like they just need to reorganize the filing cabinets and take out the recycling. But the image here is actually really beautiful. It's of mending something, of taking something that's been torn apart

¹ "St. Augustine's Analogy for Understanding the Trinity," accessed May 31, 2023, <https://mcgrathblog.nd.edu/st.-augustines-analogy-for-understanding-the-trinity>.

² If you an easy-to-read commentary on the importance of the doctrine, Daniel Migliore's *Faith Seeking Understanding* is good. Bill Rusch, who used to do ecumenical work for the ELCA, edited a good anthology of primary source documents called *The Trinitarian Controversy* that's worth checking out, even just for his introduction.

³ The NRSVue cleans this up into "be restored," which is better but still sounds a little mechanical.

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and stitching it back together. In the case of the church in Corinth, this will mean moving past these hierarchies of status and prestige that people use to claim their space and learning to live as recipients of God's mercy.

This is the kind of life that the Holy Trinity gives to God's people. The kind of love that allows us to repair past wrongs, receive the world's diversity as a gift, and to encounter one another with the mind of Christ. If God has reconciled creation through the death and resurrection of Jesus, then that reconciliation, that mending, and that "putting things in order" can begin in the body of Christ.

Some of you may have noticed that this greeting is part of our gathering rite every week. Assembled together as the people of God, we begin our liturgy by sharing God's perfect grace, love, and communion with one another. Whenever we gather together for worship, God puts us back "in order," not by making us neat and tidy and presentable, but by shaping us as the crucified and risen body of Christ. So that we share that pattern of God's always-one, ever-three life.

But that Trinitarian life isn't just about drawing us into communion. It's also pushing us out. We heard that in another ending, this one from St. Matthew's gospel. After appearing to his disciples, the risen Jesus says, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." The gospel ends with the disciples being sent.

This act of sending doesn't come out of nowhere but is at the heart of God's character. After all, when we confess God to be Triune, we are remembering how God sent God's self to us throughout history. God is a *sending* God.⁴ Every year, when we gather at Christmas, we hear the story of the sending of God's Son. Last week, at Pentecost, we heard the story of the sending of God's Spirit. When Jesus shows up on the banks of the Jordan and the Spirit shows up in Jerusalem, they aren't just randomly stumbling into the scene. They are here to reconcile and renew God's creation. They are here because God is in mission to us.

And now we hear the story of the sending of God's church. And that includes all of us. God invites us to participate in God's self-giving, expressing God's love for creation. A number of years ago, the Lutheran liturgist Gordon Lathrop was interviewed by someone who asked a really interesting question: what needs to change in our worship practices?⁵ And you expect the usual answer about music or preaching or the lectionary. And the answer he gave—paraphrasing here—is that our sending practices have become too small. We are so intentional about how we gather as God's baptized people, how we hear God's word, and how we share at Christ's meal, but that too often our sending rites are just perfunctory. It can be easy for us to forget that every time we leave worship, we are a part of God's sending. We are a part of God's mission. And through that sending, we aren't just understanding but participating in God's Triune life.

So today we give thanks not just because God is always three, ever one in theory. But that thanks to God's great love, we are always being drawn together and ever being sent out. Those two movements, drawn and sent, form the heartbeat of God's passion for the world and the source of our life together.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

⁴ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Orbis Books, 2011).

⁵ "Interviewing Liturgical Leaders: Gordon Lathrop," *PrayTellBlog* (blog), July 1, 2014, <https://www.praytellig.com/index.php/2014/07/01/interviewing-liturgical-leaders-gordon-lathrop/>.

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