

## THE HOLY TRINITY | JUNE 7, 2020

GENESIS 1:1 – 2:4a | PSALM 8 | 2 CORINTHIANS 13:11-13|  
MATTHEW 28:16-20

The Trinity is impossible to fully grasp. Reflecting on the mystery of the divine Trinity, St. Augustine once suggested, “If you understand [God], you do not understand God.”<sup>1</sup> So, you know, why even bother? Just wrap the sermon up now. No point in trying.

But that’s not entirely satisfying, and people ask about the Trinity a lot. Probably more than any other aspect of Christian doctrine. Thankfully, there’s a simple answer. You can write it down on the back of your hand if someone ever asks you to explain the Trinity. God is “one in essence, distinguished in three persons.”<sup>2</sup> So if you want to avoid being labeled a heretic, that’s the precise definition that you want to use. “One in essence, distinguished in three persons.”

My own hunch is that when people ask questions about the Trinity, they’re not asking questions about language and definitions. They’re asking questions about why the Trinity is so important. Why is something that is, by definition, impossible to understand also the characteristic feature of the Christian faith? Thankfully, we have a better answer to that.

It helps to remember that scripture has the language of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but it never uses the language of Trinity. The concept of the Trinity didn’t become important until the second or third centuries, and it wasn’t codified in something like doctrine until the fourth century. So if that language of “one in essence, distinguished in three persons” is nowhere in scripture, where did it come from? And what is it trying to do? And why is it so important?

Well, let’s start with one in essence. And let’s think about what it was like to be a believer in the early church, say around the time Paul’s letters were written. 50 or 60 AD. This is a community of people that is living through a time of unbelievable newness. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, combined with the sending of the Holy Spirit, means that God is doing something radically new in the world. There is no precedent for Jesus being raised from the dead. There’s no historical analogue for the gift of the Holy Spirit being poured out on all people. They are in uncharted territory.

But as the church experiences this radical newness, they realize something else. That the source and intention of all these actions is identical. That behind all this newness is the constant action of God. That the God of Israel, the one whom Jesus called the Father, was poured out into this one human life. And that after his resurrection, the Son is still at work in the world through the power of the Holy Spirit. There is not a God of the Old Testament and God of the New Testament. Or a God of the flesh and God of the spirit. There’s just God.

So the heart of the Trinitarian faith comes when these early believers realize that these injections of grace and mercy into history all have the same source. They all have the same character. Or, to use the doctrinal word, they all have the same essence. That the kingdom of God Jesus inaugurated is what God intended in the beginning. And the covenant community formed with the Israelites at Mt. Sinai is what God intends for all creation to experience in the city of God. God is one.

The upshot of this is that God is trustworthy. When God says that you should not kill, you don’t have to think, “Yea, but what would Jesus have to say about that?” When Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor,” you don’t have to say, “Well, maybe the Holy Spirit thinks that the wealthy are

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<sup>1</sup> St. Augustine, Sermo 52, 6, 16: PL 38:360 and Sermo 117, 3, 5: PL 38, 663

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 71.

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blessed.” There’s a coherence to God’s action. The sending of the Jesus doesn’t nullify or supersede the promises made to Israel, and the sending of the Holy Spirit doesn’t make the historical life Jesus irrelevant. When we say God is one, we’re not just saying that God is one in theory. We’re echoing the claim of those early believers that God is consistent, faithful, and trustworthy.

The second part of this is more fun. God is “distinguished in three persons.” Let’s just stop here for a minute and think about what we mean by “person.” When we talk about what a person is, we usually mean distinct individuals. We have the myth of the self-made man who achieved greatness without any help or input from anyone else. When someone says, “Be your own person,” they mean that you should do whatever you want as a unique and self-sufficient individual. When we talk about personal agency and personal responsibility and personal growth, “personal” is a way of saying that it’s about you. It is very much not about other people.

But when we say that God is distinguished in three persons, we’re implying something very different about what it means to be a person. That these three persons have their identity, their action, their character wrapped up in one another. They need each other. That the Father can’t be the Father without the Son and the Spirit. The Son can’t be the Son without the Father and the Spirit. And the Spirit can’t be the Spirit without the Father and the Son. So you can never talk about one person of the Trinity without talking about the others. The fancy Greek word for this is “perichoresis,” which comes from the root word for “dancing.”<sup>3</sup> But we would just call it “mutual dependence” or “mutual fulfillment.”

And when you think of this from the perspective of the early church, suddenly a whole bunch of new possibilities open up. This is where it starts to get fun. This mutual dependence, mutual indwelling actually reflects their own experience. For the Gentiles, this is obviously true. Their salvation depends on a Jewish savior. So if you’re a Gentile who cuts yourself off from the Jewish people and says, “We don’t have any use for you,” you’re cutting yourself off from Christ in the process.<sup>4</sup>

But it’s true for Jewish believers in the early church, too. If you’ve ever read St. Paul’s letters, you know there’s all this stuff about this offering he’s collecting. And we usually skip over it because it seems perfunctory. Like, *Oh, now we pass the plates around*. It’s actually way more interesting than that. Because it’s a collection taken up for the church in Jerusalem, which is majority Jewish, being funded by Gentiles. Gentiles that the leaders of the church in Jerusalem had very mixed feelings about.<sup>5</sup>

So what you find in the experience of the early church is unity. That unity is not just two groups of people that have been stuck together with duct tape. Or two different groups that have the same denominational affiliation. What you discover is two groups of people who find that their salvation, their welfare, their integrity is actually wrapped up in the salvation, welfare, and integrity of others. Who say, I can’t flourish until you flourish. I can’t be free until you’re free. I can’t have integrity unless you have integrity.

If there’s something we need as a community, as a country, and as a society, it’s a more Trinitarian understanding of our personhood. An understanding that our welfare is wrapped up with one another’s. One of the things this pandemic has made evident is ways in which we depend on one another. That the boundaries between us and other people are more porous than we often realize.

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<sup>3</sup> Grace Ji-Sun Kim, *Embracing the Other: The Transformative Spirit of Love* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 153.

<sup>4</sup> This is part of the reason why anti-Semitism isn’t just morally wrong but theologically incoherent.

<sup>5</sup> Paul B. Duff, "Focus On: Paul's Collection for the Poor in the Church at Jerusalem," *Oxford Biblical Studies Online*, [https://global.oup.com/obso/focus/focus\\_on\\_paul\\_collection/](https://global.oup.com/obso/focus/focus_on_paul_collection/) has a good discussion of this.

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It's not a coincidence that our search for a new culture war has latched onto masks instead of, say, hand washing. No one complains to the cart attendant at the grocery store that you don't want your cart sanitized with any of their stupid sanitizer. But people do it with masks all the time. Because you wash your hands to protect yourself. But you wear a mask mostly to protect other people. The integrity and safety of your own body depends on the actions of other people. This has always been true, but now it's just more apparent. It's literally in your face. Masks are a reminder of sickness and death, but they are also a reminder that the only way for us to find salvation, to find wholeness, to find healing, is to depend on one another.<sup>6</sup>

And that's sort of what the Trinity is saying. That when we realize our mutual interdependence, our knit-togetherness, we are not realizing our own weakness. We're beginning to participate in the divine life. Because we find our flourishing through God's gift of unity.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

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<sup>6</sup> Ironically, masks are occasionally invoked as a metaphor to explain the Trinity. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are used to describe the different masks God wears in history. It would have been a slam dunk ending to this sermon, but it also commits the ancient heresy of modalism and suggests that there is a God "behind" God and that the members of the Trinity can't exist at the same time. Would have been a good ending though.