

Trinity Sunday: 7th Jun 2020

Sermon Outline

Today is Trinity Sunday in the calendar of the Christian Year. Frankly, I'm not sure I have ever preached a sermon on the Trinity as a theological concept and there are several reasons for that.

First, the word "Trinity" is not found in the Bible. That is actually not that unusual because there are a number of theological concepts not found explicitly in the Bible that scholars and Church history and tradition have validated over the past 2,000 years.

But the absence of direct teaching from the Bible on the Trinity makes it hard to find a passage of Scripture from which to launch out for a sermon. 2 Corinthians 13.13 hints of a trinitarian relationship between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit.

The second reason I haven't preached directly on the Trinity is because it is a topic, a concept, from the academic discipline called "systematic theology." Systematic theology, briefly, is the attempt by Christian theologians to craft a coherent understanding of the work of God. Typically, systematic theologies are crafted from Scripture, Church tradition, and the overarching philosophy of the particular theologian who is writing. So, the topics of systematic theology tend to be conceptual, and often difficult to explain in a way that doesn't put you to sleep quickly.

But the primary reason I think I haven't preached specifically on the Trinity is because it is one of those doctrines that Christians worldwide affirm, but have great difficulty explaining. The idea of One God in

Three Persons — three-in-One — is a concept we have difficulty getting our heads around.

The Trinity in The Shack

A few years ago, I read an interesting book titled “The Shack” which became a bestseller. The story was compelling, but one aspect of that book sparked discussion and disagreement among Christians. William Paul Young represented the Trinity in a very unique way.

For God the Father, Young portrayed God as a large black woman, who was outgoing, warm-hearted, and kind. For God the Holy Spirit, Young’s persona was that of an Asian woman dressed in bright colors who seemed to dart in and out of sight in a Tinkerbell-like fashion. For Jesus, the author pretty much stayed with the stereotype of Jesus as a workman, complete with jeans, flannel shirt, and toolbelt. Each of these personas of God exhibited unique characteristics, and each had a specific role to play in the fictional story.

This idea of the Triune God, the Trinity, is a difficult idea to grasp. And it has been difficult for Christians from the early church down to the present. Some attempts have failed miserably to capture the three-in-oneness of God completely.

So, in order to correct the theological conversation, the early Church developed creedal statements that expressed what the Church believed. The first was the Apostles’ Creed. The Apostles’ Creed simply

affirms in three statements a belief in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

1. I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.
2. And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord;
3. I believe in the Holy Spirit.

But the Apostles' Creed left the door open for misunderstanding about the Trinity, so the Nicene Creed was developed from 325 AD, and took its final form in 381 AD.

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father [and the Son], who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Note the detailed explanation of the person of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. These details were included to correct the notion that God the Father was superior to God the Son or God the Holy Spirit. The “essence” of all three persons of the Godhead was, in other words, the same.

Theory Gives Way to Reality

But it's one thing to assert something about the Trinity, to say we believe in the Triune God, and to embrace a doctrine we cannot fully comprehend or explain. It is another thing entirely to base our understanding of God on what we see God doing. So, let me make the most important statement about the Trinity that I can make this morning, and that is — Our understanding of the Trinity is based on what we see God has done and is doing in the world. Let me give you some examples:

In the Old Testament, God is Creator of both the world, and of the nation of Israel through whom he will bless the world. Of course, God is present as Spirit, and the Messiah is both prophesied and foreshadowed in a visible manifestation to humankind of God or a god. (appearances of God, such as the angel who wrestles with Jacob). But primary on the stage of the unfolding drama of the Old Testament is the God of Israel, Yahweh, El-Shaddai, Elohim, Adonai, and all the other names by which God is called and worshipped.

In the New Testament Gospel accounts, the emphasis is upon Jesus — his birth, his baptism, his message, his life, his death, and his resurrection. But God the Father approves his Son, and the Holy Spirit descends upon — anoints — Jesus for ministry.

In the New Testament Book of Acts and the epistles, the Holy Spirit is at the forefront, equipping, enabling, guiding, empowering the early church.

In the Book of Revelation, God the Father, Son, and Spirit are all present, each featured in a way that is both consistent with the Old Testament, witnesses to the New Testament, and brings fully into being the Kingdom of God in its closing chapters.

Why Should We Care?

Okay, that surveys the “What is the Trinity?” question, even though I am sure you probably have more questions now than when we began.

But to keep this from being merely an academic exercise, we need to turn our attention to “Why do we care?”

This is what’s important and what we need to understand. Doctrine is important, but doctrine comes from the lived experiences of God’s people as they interpret the work of God in the real world.

First, the reason we should care about the Trinity, and be aware of the uniqueness of the One-in-Three and Three-in-One is this: Without a balanced view of all three persons of the Trinity, we can misinterpret the work of God in this world. If we emphasize the person of Jesus to the exclusion of God the Father and the Holy Spirit, we miss out on the fact that God sent Jesus because “God so loved the world...” The purpose of God is to redeem the world, not just the individuals in it. Salvation is the work of God, and that salvation extends not just to individuals but to God’s creation as well.

Finally, if we emphasize the Holy Spirit, and the charismatic experiences and gifts of the Spirit, it is easy to lose sight of God as Creator, Son as Redeemer, and the role that the Holy Spirit played and plays in both of those aspects of God’s work.

So, that’s the downside of why the Trinity is important to us. But what’s the upside, what are the positive reasons we need to care about developing our own understanding of the Trinity?

We Learn Two Important Lessons from The Trinity

First, in the doctrine of the Trinity, we find our model for community. As God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit relate to one another, demonstrate love for each other, and work in concert to accomplish the purpose of God in the world, we get the idea of community.

In the passages we read today, we find some of these elements of mutuality. Jesus says that the Spirit will guide his disciples, glorify Jesus, take what belongs to Jesus and give it to the disciples. But everything Jesus has comes from the Father, and that is why the Spirit can make it known to the disciples.

In the early church, the Spirit empowers, equips, and emboldens the apostles to tell the good news of Jesus, who is God's gift sent into the world to redeem it.

Jesus stated to the disciples, "As the Father has sent me, so send I you." Just as God the Father sent Jesus into the world, so Jesus sends us into the world to do the Father's work, equipped and accompanied by the Spirit of God. God's work involves more than taking individuals to heaven when they die. God's work is to bring in his kingdom on this earth, so that God's creation can know the shalom of God — the peace that says all things are as God has intended them to be.

So, God sends Jesus to bring the shalom of God — also called salvation — to the nation of Israel and to all who will respond, whether Jew or not. Which is why Jesus teaches his disciples to pray “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

The Father and Son then send the Spirit who equips, empowers, and emboldens the early apostles as well as us today.

So, let me encourage you today to think about the Trinity — God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. But we can't stop at just thinking about a theological concept. As followers of Jesus, we are loved by the Father, and led by the Spirit. All three persons of the Godhead are at work in our lives, in the life of this church, and in the life of this world.

As we live in new awareness of God in all God's expressions as Father, Son, and Spirit, our spiritual lives will deepen, our vision of God's kingdom will expand, and the work that God has chosen for us will take on a new vitality and urgency.