

“What Does ‘Trinity’ Mean?”

Isaiah 40:10-18, 28; 2 Corinthians 13:10-13;
Matthew 28:16-20; John 14:22-27

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First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

I titled the sermon today “What Does Trinity Mean?” Dale gave me the answer: it means three. So I guess we can go home. That’s the reaction I usually have when I think about Trinity. It’s three. That’s good. Let’s go.

I went to a movie on Friday night called “The Theory of Everything.” It was about Stephen Hawking and his wife Jane. The movie is about her helping him so much. Stephen Hawking is a physicist who has a physical disease. At first they thought it was Lou Gehrig’s disease, but he’s still alive so they don’t know what it is. But he has this progressive loss of ability to do anything. His mind hasn’t changed, but his physical ability has changed. There’s a point in the movie where his wife is helping him put on a sweater. They have two or three children, and one of the children starts crying in the midst of this. She has to go take care of the child. Think about having three children and an adult that you have to take care of at the same time—all their physical needs. She is pretty harried. In the next scene, her mother comes in. I assume her mother is going to sit down and talk to her about how important it is for her to find ways to take care of herself and to talk to her about how she’s feeling. Her mother does say, “I need to talk to you.” Then she says, “I think you should join the church choir. It’s only an hour a week.” Jane turns to her and says, “I think that’s the most English thing anyone has ever said to me.”

Sometimes I feel like the Trinity is the same kind of thing. There’s a lot we need to sit down and talk about, but why don’t we just join the church choir. We know that we have God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We’re good.

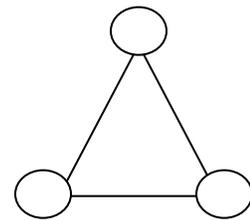
As it turns out, her going to that one hour of choir has quite an impact on her life in unexpected ways. I would suggest that when we leave the Trinity alone so much and just think about it as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and leave it there, it has an impact on our life and how we think about it. So I’m going to spend a little time thinking about the nature of a Trinitarian God. What does it mean that God can be described as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and how has that developed over time?

Our Confessions often have taken that realization that we have God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and thought about it in fairly philosophical terms. In doing so, it has almost made it so far away from us that we really don’t think about it. It’s one of the things, I think, that has distanced us from the nature of the Trinity because it’s been thought of as so distant. It is something that’s incredibly hard to understand, so it makes some sense that we have thought about it and tried to describe it in broad philosophical terms. Or, we have tried to come up with a metaphysical understanding of what it means, so the Father begot the Son from who proceeds the Spirit, and yet they are co-eternal, everlasting. Again, it leaves us scratching our heads. It’s contradictory, and yet that tends to be where we stop with thinking about the Trinity.

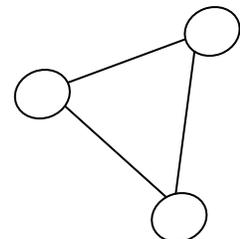
We know we have a Trinitarian God. There are some difficulties we get into because we think of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We begin to think of God hierarchically. And it makes some sense. At the time when this was really being thought about was a time when society was very hierarchical. There was a king, and there were the king's workers on various levels. So we began to think about God in that way. And because we began to think about God that way, we began to say that we should have kings and we should have those people under them. It's kind of a circular argument, circular reasoning, where we let the metaphor we use begin to shape the nature of our understanding of who we are. So it's important to begin to think about the nature of the Trinity because it can influence how we begin to think about ourselves.

Our Confessions say they are co-eternal, they are indivisible, they are not distinct, they are not on different levels. But we may begin to think about them that way. Are there some other ways we can think about the nature of who God is in Trinity that make sense to us?

I think this is the way we usually think about God—kind of a three-sided figure with the circles representing the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Sometimes we think about one, sometimes we think about another. But how often do we think about what God does?



What happens if I rotate this figure? All the circles move. So one of the things we might think about is that if God is completely one, when God moves all of God moves. As we think about this Trinitarian nature of God—when one side moves, another side moves—it's not quite as simple as just rotating clockwise. It probably has a sense of moving in ways that intertwine.



There is some theological background for thinking about God this way. The Eastern Orthodox Church has a way of thinking about it. When we think about God moving together (rotating the figure), they think about the Trinity being in a community. It's more of a dance together. If you think about God being a God who loves, shouldn't there be love within the Trinity? Think about it. When you love somebody, when they move, it moves you. So that's one way of thinking about Trinity. The persons of the Trinity are a way of describing a communal nature to God. I would say family—father, mother, child—but even that could get hierarchical. They think more of it as a dance with three partners.

There are some things about thinking of the Trinity in this way that matter to us. If we think about God's communal nature, a communion of love, it makes some sense that God might come and want to be in communion with us. Or, the way it's often said in Biblical story is *covenant*. God made a covenant. Why would God come and covenant with us? He covenants in the Old Testament; he invites us to be part of a New Covenant through Christ. If we think about God as having a relational nature, it makes

sense. And think about what Jesus says are the most important commandments—to love God with all our heart, mind, and soul and love our neighbor as ourselves. He creates another Trinitarian community for us to be part of.

As with any image of God, it can't be complete. It's only partial. God is so huge, and we see God in so many different ways. One of the things this doesn't quite get at, but gets at a little bit, is that God is also indivisible. Probably it's not so much an indivisibility that just pulls one around with the other, but one in which they are fully aware of what the other is doing. Another way of saying it is if God is indivisible, then when Jesus acts, it is God's act. If the Holy Spirit is at work, God is at work. When God is at work, the Holy Spirit and Jesus are at work. They are indivisible.

One of the problems we have had with our vision of the Trinity is that we say God is one and then we begin to make God the one who is full of wrath and Jesus the one who is full of grace, and the Holy Spirit the one who manages it all. If God is indivisible, they are all part of all the ways that we understand God. God is not absent in Jesus' suffering on the cross. God goes through the life of Christ. God understands our suffering. In fact, it feels to me that what God does is come and recognize our suffering in a way that takes it upon himself so that we are open to come to him, that our sin is not in the way, and to show us that all the sin we heap upon him doesn't make him go away. That's what resurrection is all about.

So if we think about God as a community of love that is indivisible, intertwined, it begins to shape who we might be as we love God with our heart, mind, and soul, our neighbor as ourselves.

I think oftentimes in our society we're shaped toward believing that we are so separate that whatever we do doesn't really matter. But the minute you recognize that you're in a relationship with somebody else and what you do affects them, we begin to recognize that there are some ways we are not that different. There is indivisibility with us as well. We are shaped by and react to and live in relationship with one another. Our lives are, too, intertwined. What God invites us to is to recognize that.

I think that when God covenants with us, he is inviting us to recognize that we live in relationship, to formally say so, to recognize that commitment. He invited us to recognize how intertwined we are with God and with one another. So as we begin to think about who God is, it shapes who we think we are, as well, and who he invites us to be. We are invited to be a community of faith, to recognize we are the children of God, to be a family together, to recognize that those relationships matter. What we do as individuals, even those things we think are only going to be an hour a week of our time, can end up changing our lives. How we think about our God, I think, can change our lives. A God who so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son that we should not perish, but have eternal life. A God we are intertwined with, who intertwines his presence with us and invites us to do that together and to recognize the nature of following Christ is to live in the community of love.

So I invite you this week to think about the ways your life is intertwined with other people, with the community, with the nation, with the world. Think about the ways we are intertwined with one another and how we are intertwined with the Creator.

Let's pray:

Gracious God, it's clear that we are not always able to understand exactly who you are. We are thankful that you continually come to us, that through scripture you reveal to us that you have steadfast love and faithfulness, that you have sent your son to us that we might begin to understand the nature of following him and being in the community he forms, and how that community is shaped in love of you, of one another, and ourselves. Lord, help us recognize the way we are intertwined in this world and intertwined with you, and how we need to pay attention to that, for you will guide us, you will give us strength, you will help us rise up. Lord, we are thankful that you are our God, that you are a Triune God that shows us the wonder of a community of love and offers us the grace we need to be in relationship with you. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.