

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

June 4, 2023 – TRINITY SUNDAY, YR. A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George–Hacker

Sermon: “*Three-in-One: A Divine Community of Love*”

Old Testament	Genesis 1:1-2:4a	(God created the earth and everything on it)
Psalter	Canticle 13	(Praise to the Holy Trinity)
Epistle	2 Corinthians 13:11-13	(The Lord is exalted, yet mindful of us)
Gospel	St. Matthew 28:16-20	(All authority in heaven and earth is given to Jesus)

This Sunday is possibly the only one when we do not celebrate an event from the life of Jesus, but rather, we highlight a doctrine of the Church that is essential to our faith as Christians. That is, we believe in one God in three Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—whom we call the Trinity. Rather than trying to define what the Church has struggled over for more than 2,000 years, I’d like us to examine this complex teaching through three questions and answers: 1. Is the Trinity Scriptural? 2. Does the Trinity make sense? And 3. What is the significance of the Trinity?¹

One reason understanding the Trinity is so difficult is that the Bible never explains it. While the Apostle Paul wrote a practical dissertation on justification by faith and St. Luke filled reams of papyrus with historical information about Jesus and the birth of Christianity, none of the biblical writers took the time to educate or enlighten us concerning the nature of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In fact, the word “Trinity” itself is never used in the Bible.

However, what the Bible does make clear is that there is one God in three Persons, each of Whom is God. The evidence for God as the Holy Trinity goes all the way back to the first verse of the Bible. The unforgettable opening words of Genesis 1:1 declare: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” Now, in English this verse does not appear to provide evidence for a Triune God, but in the original Hebrew it does. You see, the Hebrew word used for “God” is *'elōhim*, which is the *plural* form of the word *'el* (meaning, God). This word is often used for God throughout the Old Testament, occurring approximately 2,600 times. The word is unique because it’s plural in *form*, but singular in *meaning*.

An English equivalent might be the word “news.” You wouldn’t say, “Those News are on at 6:00.” Rather, we say, “The News is on at 6:00.” News is plural in *form*, but singular in *meaning*. Just as there is more than one item in the News, *'elōhim* indicates a plurality of Persons—not different gods!—within the One God of Creation. In fact, one sentence later, the Bible says, “And the *Spirit of God* was hovering over the surface of the waters” (Genesis 1:2 NLT). So, already the first two verses of the Bible refer to God and the Spirit of God. Then, toward the end of the chapter, God says, “Let *Us* make man in *Our* image, according to *Our* likeness” (Genesis 1:26 NKJV). This is actually one of the clearest indications that God, in His unity, is a plurality of Persons. The story of Creation refers to God the Father and God the Spirit.

It’s left for St. John the Evangelist to fill us in about Jesus as the Third Person, when he writes: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made” (John 1:1 NKJV). Used here, the Greek word *logos* refers to God’s power to speak things into existence. But it is also a Messianic Title for Jesus, the Son of God. The Living Bible renders John 1:1 as: “Before anything else existed, there was Christ, with God. He has always been alive and is Himself God” (John 1:1 TLB). While we may not be able to apprehend the fullest meaning of that statement, we can surely comprehend that John is saying: Jesus is God, and He is also *with* God. Jesus tried to explain this to His followers when He said, “Believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (John 14:11 NLT). And when He said, “The Father and I are one” (John 10:30 NLT). Thus, we see, God’s nature is a “communal” one.

We also see this when Jesus told His followers, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit...” (Matthew 28:19). Jesus didn’t say, “names” of, but “name” of. In other words, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are co-equals in name, being, and authority.

What Jesus says here correlates with what the Hebrew “*Shema*” proclaimed thousands of years earlier, “The Lord is God, the Lord our God is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4). Literally: “Yahweh is our *'elōhim*. Yahweh is one,” declaring “God (*'elōhim* = plural) is one.” It’s as if God were saying of himself, “We are One.” While we can’t pretend to fully understand the relationship among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Bible says each is God and together they are One God.

Now, over the centuries people have come up with a host of ways to grasp the notion of the Trinity, so let’s ask the second question: Does the Trinity make sense? In other words, is there a logic to this doctrine, or is it simply beyond us? Well, yes and no.

Way back in the fourth century, St. Augustine set out to fully understand the Trinity. He spent several years of his life studying and contemplating the nature of God and almost drove himself insane until one fateful day. He was walking along the beach and saw a little boy dumping buckets of water into a hole he had dug in the sand. Augustine asked him, “What are you doing?” The boy answered, “I’m putting the ocean into this hole.” It was only then that Augustine realized his quest to understand the Trinity was like that child trying to put the ocean into a small hole in the sand. He grasped that there is more to the nature of God than our small human minds can *possibly* contain.

That said, I do believe God wants us to know His true nature. And one illustration can help us to better comprehend His Triune nature. St. Patrick of Ireland used a shamrock to talk about the Trinity, because a three-leaf clover actually has only one leaf. It’s what botanists refer to as a composite leaf—three leaves in one, one leaf in three. And that’s not a bad symbol for the nature of God.

We can never fully apprehend the nature of God—He is simply too vast for our finite minds—however, it is essential that we at least comprehend that the God of Creation exists eternally in three Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This leaves us with our last question: What is the significance of the Trinity? In other words, what difference does the Trinity make in *our* lives?

Well, for us Christians—we are *not* Unitarians—the Trinity is supremely significant. Our Triune God makes all the difference in the world. Belief in the Trinity separates Christianity from every other religion in human history. At present, we live in highly pluralistic, multi-cultural world, and there are innumerable views of God. One is atheism—the belief that there is no God. Although less than 5% of North Americans claim to be atheists,² their numbers are growing. Another view is polytheism—such as the ancient Greeks, Romans, and Hindus held—the belief that there are many gods. Pantheism believes that everything in nature is god. Many wiccans and new-age spiritualists are pantheistic.

Then there is traditional monotheism—belief in one and only one God. Muslims and Jews are both monotheistic, and most would say that Christians are monotheistic. While it’s true that Christians believe in one God, our faith is not the same as that of other monotheistic religions. Christianity is unique in our understanding of God’s Trinitarian nature. Some say Jews, Muslims, and Christians worship the same God—which is true, in a sense.

But while other faiths may be looking at the same pyramid, they are just looking at one side of it. Only when one can see all sides of the pyramid simultaneously can one discern God as He truly is. Moreover, the acceptance of the Trinity gives us a standard by which we can separate Christianity from cultism. Almost every heresy throughout Church history has begun with a misunderstanding of the nature of God. And even though the Trinity is an essential Christian doctrine, lots of so-called Christians deny it. Let’s look at some examples:

The Mormons—known as The Church of Latter Day Saints—reject Jesus as the eternal God. They believe He was created before the world and holds a special place, but He is not God. Jehovah’s Witnesses ridicule the idea of the Trinity. They believe Jesus was, in fact, the Archangel Michael in human form. They will point out that 1+1+1 does not equal one. And that’s true. But, if we’re speaking of dimensions, it is accurate to say 1 x 1 x 1 = 1.

“Oneness Pentecostals” hold to a heretical doctrine known as modalism. They believe that in the beginning God was the Father, then He became the Son, then He became the Spirit. Bishop T.D. Jakes, an adherent of this theology, remarked: “God just kept changing into stuff.”³ But if that were true, how was Jesus conceived “by the Holy Spirit” (Luke 1:35) and who was Jesus talking to when He prayed to the Father (John 17)? Modalism doesn’t make sense and it’s inconsistent with what the Bible teaches.

Someone once said, “If you try to explain the Trinity, you will lose your mind. But if you deny it, you will lose your soul.” We’ll revisit this point when together we recite the Creed of St. Athanasius following the sermon.

Finally, the doctrine of the Trinity points us to the greatness and all-sufficiency of God. It used to be popular, and probably still is, to say that God created us because He was lonely. But that’s nonsense. There is—and always has been—perfect fellowship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. God is not lacking in any way. He did not create us because of His need, for God needs nothing. God is perfect and complete in every way. In John 3:35, Jesus says, “The Father loves the Son.” And later (14:13), Jesus says, “I love the Father!” This tells us that our God is personal and intimate, and that He is God who exists in a love relationship.

The beautiful thing is—this same fathomless God chose to seek a direct relationship with you and me. He chose to create us *because He loves us* and *wants us to love Him*. Each person of the Trinity was involved in making this possible. God the Father desired it so much that through the power of the Holy Spirit, God the Son became a human being with all our limitations and came to earth to invite us to receive that amazing love. God chose to step out of Heaven to reach us directly as His Son, so that in knowing Christ, we could come to know God as He truly is. And, He has given us His Holy Spirit to enable that love relationship to continue throughout our lives and into eternity.

I will close with the same Trinitarian Benediction with which St. Paul (2 Corinthians 13:14 NIV) blessed the Church in Corinth: “May the *grace* of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the *love* of God, and the *fellowship* of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” *Amen!*

¹ Adapt. Scott Bayles, “St. Patrick’s Day: The Trinity,” 18 April 2009, [SermonCentral.com](https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/saint-patrick-s-day-the-trinity-scott-bayles-sermon-on-god-the-father-134302) <<https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/saint-patrick-s-day-the-trinity-scott-bayles-sermon-on-god-the-father-134302>> 22 May 2023. Used with permission.

² “Demographics of Atheism,” 7 May 2023, [Wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_atheism#Studies_and_statistics), <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_atheism#Studies_and_statistics> 22 May 2023.

³ “T.D. Jakes’ Modalistic Heresy,” 24 October 2018, [Apologetics Resource Center](https://arcapologetics.org/t-d-jakes-modalistic-heresy/), <<https://arcapologetics.org/t-d-jakes-modalistic-heresy/>> 22 May 2023.