

Our Trinity Relationship

Isaiah 6:1-8; Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17

by Nick Strobel at Wesley UMC on May 27, 2018

Slides used in sermon PDF — Slides used in sermon PPTx

Let us begin with a word of prayer.

Loving God,

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

Amen.

Today is Trinity Sunday when we celebrate the triune nature of God: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Because we are celebrating this triune nature of God today, I thought we should have three scripture readings today. It was also because the three passages emphasize one person of the Trinity.

<slide 3> Isaiah is called by God as the Father sitting on a throne, high and lofty and calls God King, the LORD of hosts.

<slide 4> Our gospel reading emphasizes the Son and includes one of the most well-known verses of the Bible John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.”

<slide 5> Our reading from Paul’s letter to the community in Rome emphasizes the work of the Holy Spirit among us and by whom we become children of God.

<slide 6> As I thought about the scripture passages this week, I wanted to first come up with some sort of description of the Trinity. Not an easy task! Extremely smart people down through the centuries have tried to describe the Trinity.

<slide 7> In our continual quest to try to encapsulate a complete understanding of God, our words fail us and we finally have to acknowledge that God cannot be put in a box.

<slide 8> However, I think God gave us curiosity and the drive to transcend beyond ourselves. Our desire to know God and to try to understand God is built into us by God, so it’s okay to keep trying as long as we do it with

humility, knowing that our finite brains, experience and vocabulary will never be able to fully grasp the infinite, eternal, and holiness of God. (Twenty or thirty years from now, I'll look back on what I wrote down for this sermon and probably shake my head thinking, "Boy, did I have a lot still to learn!) That same drive, same quest to understand God will lead us to hear God's call to service and answer with Isaiah, "Here I am; send me!"

<slide 9> Some people say that the Trinity is an unnecessary invention by theologians who came along many generations after the events described in the Bible. The Gospel according to John and Paul's letter to the Romans talk about God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, so this idea of God being Father, Son, and Holy Spirit has deep roots in the Bible. These roots are not just the New Testament either. In the first two verses of Genesis we read about God as Creator of the heavens and the earth and the Spirit from God sweeping over the waters. A little bit later in the creation story God says, "let *us* make humankind in our image, according to *our* likeness".

<slide 10> In our Isaiah passage we have in verse 8 "Whom shall I send, and who will go for *us*?" In the books of the prophets we find descriptions of the Son of Man, a title Jesus gave to himself. There are other hints of the triune nature of God in the Old Testament ...

<slide 11> ...but it wasn't until God sent the Son in human flesh in the form of the one we call Jesus the Christ and the experience of receiving the Spirit of God at Pentecost after Jesus had ascended into heaven that Christians began in earnest to try to understand God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

<slide 12> During Lent some of us gathered after worship for a study on the Apostles' Creed. Key parts of the Apostles' Creed go back to at least the late second century. It is a statement of belief about God. Let's take a look at it. It's in the back of the hymnal. (It is also what we profess in our baptismal service but let's use the one in the back of the hymnal.) We used the ecumenical version in the study—#882 of the hymnal. <Read it and point to various parts of the image on the bulletin cover: **slides 13–15**>

<slide 16> The Apostles' Creed left some unanswered questions, particularly on the nature of the Son. One of the controversies that arose in early Christianity was the Son as the Logos or the Word of God as in the first verse of John's gospel "In the beginning was Word, and the Word was

with God... All things came into being through him [the Word].” So the Logos, the Son, came to be viewed by some as an intermediary, halfway between God and the Creation. That subordinate view was rejected in the first ecumenical gathering, the Council of Nicaea in 325. The Son is eternally begotten of the Father. Well, actually the subordinate view hung around for another 50 years and it wasn’t until the second ecumenical council held in Constantinople in 381 that revised the Nicene Creed into what we have today. It is #880 in our hymnal. Although the council was held in Constantinople, it was an affirmation of the creed of Nicaea, so we call it the Nicene Creed.

<slide 17> As a result of the Council of Constantinople, the Holy Spirit also became to be regarded as the same essence as the Father and the Son. Notice in the image on our bulletin cover that the three lobes are drawn as one line.

In the Hymn of Grace right before the message, we sang “Holy, holy, holy! Merciful and mighty, God in three persons, blessed Trinity!” Echoes of the Isaiah passage there but there’s also the “three persons”. Doesn’t that mean three Gods? No. One of the church leaders in the 4th century, Gregory of Nyssa, said that the three persons of the Trinity have the same will and action, not three persons with three different wills like Peter, Paul, and Mary but one God with one will and one action. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have one will, they can’t disagree. (Image on the bulletin: Three lobes drawn with One line.)

<slide 18> Also, when the word “person” was used way back when all this was being formulated, the word “person” did not have its modern individualistic meaning, it did not mean a separate personality, a separate consciousness, a separate will. Our hymn’s “God in three persons, blessed Trinity” is using the classical meaning of three roles in our salvation history.

In the Creed study we looked at a couple of analogies and one diagram given by Adam Hamilton to try to describe the three persons of the one triune God. Analogies and diagrams can only go so far but they can help point toward a better understanding.

<slide 19> The first analogy is the atom which is made of three sub-atomic particles: a proton and neutron and electron bound together into one chemical unit. An atom without the three particles is not an atom (I’m

ignoring the lightest isotope of hydrogen). The analogy breaks down if you start talking about the persons as parts of God. No parts—each is God.

<slide 20> The second analogy is the human being. “What makes you ‘you’? It’s not simply your body, nor your mind, nor your spirit; rather, all three of these things, taken together, make you who you are.” (Hamilton in *Creed*, p. 94). **<slide 21>**

<slide 22> The diagram we saw in the Creed study is the Shield of the Trinity. The diagram illustrates the great church father Saint Augustine’s summary of the doctrine of the Trinity in seven statements: “the Father is God”; “the Son is God”; “the Holy Spirit is God.” “The Father is not the Son”; “the Son is not the Holy Spirit”; “the Holy Spirit is not the Father.” And the seventh statement: “there is one God and only one God.”

So how are the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit different from each other, if they have the same will, the same essence (one Being), the same action, and they always act together?

<slide 23> We get an answer from the Nicene Creed: “the Father begets the Son, the Son does not beget the Father. The Father is, in fact, unbegotten, unoriginated. The Son originates from the Father, the Father does not originate from the Son” (Phillip Cary, Professor from Eastern University, lecture 10 of *The History of Christian Theology*). Likewise with the Holy Spirit “who proceeds from the Father and the Son” (*Nicene Creed*). “The Trinity is a community of persons in relationship to each other, and that relationship distinguishes the three but also binds them in one as God. Three persons. One God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” (Cary, lecture 10).

<slide 24> That thought of the Trinity as relationship is the second thing I wanted to share and it is why highlighting the Trinity matters. In the first letter of John, he tells us “God is love” (1 John 4:8). The relationship in the Trinity is our model for what is a loving relationship. Love is the essence of the Trinity and love requires relationship, someone to love. This teaching of God as personal, communal and loving relationship has implications for understanding human personality, especially our intricacy and worth.

<slide 25> In the Christian Believer study we had several years ago, the author of the study book, J Ellsworth Kalas explained the difference between the person and the individual: “To be a person is to be who you

are, but to be an individual is to assert your independence of others. We are never more personal than when we relate to others, either in revealing our own person or in inquiring into the person of others. But to be individualistic is to move away from personhood by exalting the solitary.

In this highly individualistic culture, we need a true understanding of personhood. We might even say, a ‘sanctified understanding,’ because to see persons rightly is to see them holy. [that’s h-o-l-y] And wholly too. [w-h-o-l-l-y] The Trinity reveals the divine nature not in individualism (which would, of course, give us three gods) but in relationship and community. When we sing, ‘God in three persons, blessed Trinity,’ we declare that one cannot really be a person except in community...the Holy Trinity gives us an eternal paradigm for personhood” (Kalas, *Christian Believer: Knowing God with Heart and Mind*, p. 193).

<slide 26> When we try to understand God, we will heed God’s call to be in relationship with each other through the action of the Holy Spirit. In the Apostles’ Creed, all the language after “I believe in the Holy Spirit” is about us—our relationship to God and to each other. We are called to be a holy communion, forgiving each other, and acting with the certainty that evil and death do NOT have the last say—there is resurrection and life everlasting.

<slide 27> When we try to understand God, we will be of service to each other and to all whom God calls beloved. As the body of Christ—“heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ”—we are sent into the world, not to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved by the power of the Holy Spirit acting through us. My prayer is that when we hear God saying “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”, that each of us will respond, “Here am I; send me!”

<slide 28> Amen.