

### *Grace, Love, Fellowship*

Finally, brothers and sisters, good-bye. Put things in order, respond to my encouragement, be in harmony with each other, and live in peace—and the God of love and peace will be with you. Say hello to each other with a holy kiss. All of God's people say hello to you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

2 Cor. 13:11-13 (C.E.B.)

One of the first rules I remember learning about public speaking was to never begin with an apology. The reasoning is that beginning with an apology takes away from whatever the speaker is going to say, it minimizes the topic. Today I'm breaking that rule: I'm going to begin with an apology.

My apology is that I am going to speak about the Trinity today, a topic not many of us are wondering about, an idea that few of us feel a pressing need to understand, a topic that is so ethereal it is hard to connect with our daily lives.

And just so you know – even though today is Trinity Sunday I am not obligated to speak about it. Nor am I obligated to preach from the Lectionary, for that matter. And even though I choose to follow the Lectionary, there is still no obligation to speak about Trinity today. I could easily preach on this text without addressing the Trinity in my sermon.

But there are only a couple of days in the church calendar set aside for doctrinal issues. This is one of them. It's a day set aside to discuss and explore what it means to worship a Three-in-one, One-in-three, Triune God.

Last week, for those who were here, we heard the concept mentioned as part of the conversation from the Fourth Century. That was when the church met to come to an agreement about how to understand this mysterious God we worship.

There are a few theologians who continue to wrestle with it, people like Duane Friesen who wrote *Artists, Citizens, Philosophers* (Herald Press, 2000). But not many of us get excited about the conversation.

The truth is that the doctrine of the Trinity is never addressed directly in the scriptures; it is only alluded to. There are Biblical stories that raise questions, questions the church found could best be answered with the concept of the Trinity.<sup>1</sup> It answers a question, however, I'm afraid we're no longer asking.

If we were playing Jeopardy, few of us would know the question that gives us this answer. If anything, we now ask the *opposite* question of what the Trinity is rather than how it resolves the apparent contradictions of the one God who shows up in different shapes and forms.

Most of us are more like Anne Lamott who suggests, "I don't need to understand the hypostatic unity of the Trinity; I just need to turn my life over to whoever came up with redwood trees."<sup>2</sup>

My apology is that I am launching into a discussion about the Trinity today, knowing it isn't the most pressing issue on your minds – or mine, for that matter! I am choosing to do so because it is a core belief of the

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<sup>1</sup> Best, p. 137

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Karoline Lewis at WorkingPreacher.org

Christian faith, something that makes us unique among the world's religions; something I believe should be discussed openly at least once in a while.

Let me pose a question to begin, a question to ponder, one you may not have thought to ask and may not care what the answer might be: What does it mean to *believe* in the Trinity? What does it mean to believe in a God who is Three-in-one and One-in-three?

We occasionally use creeds in our church, but we are not what you might call a “creedal church.” In other words, we do not require people to believe every word of the creeds we recite. We have several different creeds in our hymnal, two of which we are using in worship today. You can turn in your hymnals to find several others, beginning with the one we used as a part of our Call to Worship (# 921).<sup>3</sup> Probably the best known are *The Apostles' Creed* (# 923) and *The Nicene Creed* (# 924).

Each of these creeds has their own history; each answers their own questions. And each draws a line between those who are “believers” and those who are not. (It's part of the reason we are not a “creedal church.” We don't like to draw those lines too heavily because we believe everyone is capable of changing and growing in their faith. We prefer to find ways to include rather than exclude.)

Most creeds, however, begin with the phrase, “we believe” or “I believe.”

So before attempting to answer my question about believing in the Trinity we should probably ask what it means to believe. You may never have thought about what it means to believe something. We usually use it to refer to our opinions, though:

- I believe I'll have a sandwich for lunch.
- I believe the extreme weather we've seen is a result of global warming.
- I believe the election was stolen.
- I believe Jimmy Buffet makes the best music.

Those are opinions some of us might hold. But holding any of them will make little difference in the way we live, and even less of a difference in our relationships with others. The Biblical word for “believe,” however, is related to the word for “faith.” It is more than an “opinion;” it's something we make a commitment to or build our life around.

We get closer to that sense of believing when we say we believe someone is telling the truth, whether that be a particular news anchor or the Surgeon General. It becomes a synonym for trust rather than an expression of a personal opinion.

Martin Thielen is a pastor who tells the story of a friendship he developed with Danny, a man who claimed to be an atheist.<sup>4</sup> As they spent time together, their friendship grew and their conversations occasionally turned to religious matters. One day Danny told Thielen he thought he was no longer an atheist but had become an agnostic.

For those who do not know the difference, Atheists believe there is no God while Agnostics believe there may be a God but it doesn't matter because there is no implied relationship.

Danny was changing. He started to have an opinion about God rather than an outright rejection of God.

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<sup>3</sup> Curious to me, some of the creeds in *Voices Together* are not named or titled.

<sup>4</sup> *What is the Least I can Believe and Still be a Christian* (Westminster/John Knox, 2011), p. ix.

More time passed before his friend told Thielen he was thinking about becoming a Christian. So Danny asked what was the least he could believe and still be a Christian. That question became the title of a book Thielen subsequently wrote. But the question of “the least we can believe” suggests there is more to the idea of “belief” than simply having an opinion. Thielen’s friend had opinions about God before he made the step toward belief. So what is the difference?

When the early church began to write their creeds, they worked for the most part from the Latin word, *credo* rather than *fidei* (which we often translate as faith). We may never know the reason they chose one over the other, since both carry a sense of commitment, a trust, rather than just a mental acceptance of an idea or opinion. We sense that when we realize the word “credit” is also derived from *credo*. Our trust in someone is on the line when we offer them credit.

In a lecture I heard a few years ago, Diana Butler Bass explained the dilemma the church had when it translated the word *credo* into English. They needed an English word that included a sense of relationship, not just intellectual assent. It was more than an opinion; it was also a sense of commitment. The relationship also changed the way a person who professed it would live.

We all recognize the noun form in the word “creed.” But what word makes it a personal commitment? They could have used profess, perhaps. What other word would fit? The word they eventually found, the word we have used ever since was “believe” from the Old English word, “belove.”

It makes an interesting exercise to go back and use it in that form when we recite one of the creeds:  
I belove God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth;  
I belove Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord . . .  
I belove the Holy Spirit . . .<sup>5</sup>

That changes the question, doesn’t it? Now Danny’s question becomes, what is the least we can love about God and still be a Christian? Or, more on topic for today, what is it about the Trinity that implies a relationship of *love*, of being beloved – while holding a Triune God in our heart as our beloved?

It is a curious observation that in our text today, Paul speaks of “the God of love” (2 Cor. 13:11). Curious because this is the only place in the entire canon of scripture that we find the phrase.

- John tells us that God is love (1 Jn. 4:8, 16).
- Jesus tells us to love one another (Jn. 13:24).

But nowhere else do we hear about “the God of love.”

I am convinced love is at the core of the Trinity.

And I know, whenever we try to explain the Trinity, we are tempted to overstate either the Three-in-one or the One-in-three. Like a true paradox, both are fully true at the same time and it is hard to see both at once; so we tend to look more closely at one than the other. But when we keep love at the core, we find a balance between them.

So for example, we can speak about someone being a mother, a daughter, and a sister and still be the same person. But that leaves us too close to the One-in-three. Sometimes we have a variation of that when we speak about which “hat” we are wearing or what role we are playing at any given time. But the three parts of the Trinity are more than just roles they are playing; they are distinct and unique entities.

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<sup>5</sup> An intentional paraphrase of *The Apostles’ Creed*.

On the other extreme, there is the metaphor that comes from the world of music. There may be three different notes that combine to make up a new sound, the sound of a chord. That metaphor gets too close to being about three distinct things, however, since, unlike musical notes, no part of the Trinity can exist without the others.

I've also tried to explain the concept of the Trinity using an analogy from science. Water can be experienced as a liquid or a solid or a gas. It's still water, no matter what form it takes. But in the Trinity, there is an implied relationship between the three. The Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Spirit and the Spirit loves the Father. It's also true in the reverse order. That mutual relationship is missing in my analogy of the water.

Some theologians make a distinction in their discussions between the outward appearance of the Trinity and the inward workings of the Trinity. (For those who want to know more about it or who have heard the words before, there are fancy words for that distinction – economical and ontological. It is not my intent, however, to swim too deeply into the scholarly oceans of that conversation; I'll let experts use those words.)

As a friend of mine said on Facebook this week, we can either explain the Trinity or love the Trinity; we can't do both.

So I I choose to focus on the relationship between “the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,” as the traditional language has referred to them. That understanding is that their relationship between one another is rooted in love. It is love that binds the Three-in-one together so closely that they are indeed only one God. It is how the Father is related to the Son, and how the Son is related to the Spirit, and how the Spirit is related to the Father. Their love emanates to the world that God creates, redeems, and sustains.<sup>6</sup>

Since we are created in the image of God, it can be argued that their relationship with each other defines the nature of our relationships with one another as well as with God, creating a unique form of the Trinity in the church that binds us into one body with love, a love that encompasses you, and me, and God. I like to think Paul is inviting us into that relationship when he speaks of God's love and grace and fellowship (2 Cor. 13:13).

No one metaphor fully captures the nuances of the Trinity. But each can inform and inspire our hearts and our lives as we respond to the story of God's love and grace and communion (2 Cor. 13:13) – with God and with each other.

That is what I believe about the God I love.

And for that, I make no apologies.

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<sup>6</sup> A popular way of expressing the Trinity, using “gender neutral” language; the primary argument against using this version is that it depersonalizes God.

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