

THE MYSTERY OF THE TRIUNE GOD

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2 Corinthians 13:11-13 (The Message)

13:11

And that's about it, friends. Be cheerful. Keep things in good repair. Keep your spirits up. Think in harmony. Be agreeable. Do all that, and the God of love and peace will be with you for sure.

13:12

Greet one another with a holy embrace.

13:13

All the brothers and sisters here say hello.

13:14

The amazing grace of the Master, Jesus Christ, the extravagant love of God, the intimate friendship of the Holy Spirit, be with all of you.

Today is Trinity Sunday. Trinity Sunday is a day that has been celebrated in the Christian church since the 10th century. A day to lift up the triune nature of God. God in three persons--Father, Son and Holy Spirit. If you study the Bible, you will discover that the idea of the Trinity is not emphatically stated as a doctrine in the scriptures. Yet, by implication, it is stated many times.

The early Christians soon discovered that they simply could not speak of God without speaking of the three ways in which God had revealed himself to them. This does not mean that there are three separate Gods. It means that there is one God who has shown himself, revealed himself, in three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

Tertullian, one of the theologians of the early church, explained the Trinity in a metaphor. God the Father he described as a deep root, the Son as the shoot that breaks forth into the world, and the Spirit as that which spreads beauty and fragrance."

Let's look at Scripture where we can learn several things about the Trinity & these 3 revelations of God. First, all three are co-eternal. Second, all three are co-equal. And third, all three are unified in a common purpose.

There are several examples of where God uses plural pronouns and verbs to refer to Himself:

Genesis 1:26 "Then God said, let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.

Genesis 3:22 "And the Lord God said, 'The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil.'"

Genesis 11:7 "Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other." (Story of The Tower of Babel)

Isaiah 6:8 Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?’ And I said, “Here am I. Send me.”

Theologians have long believed that these verses point to how Jesus and the Holy Spirit were co-eternal and co-equal with God from the beginning.

Other verses that point out Jesus’ co-eternal status with God are:

John 1:1, 14 “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. . . . The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 17:5 “And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.”

John 14:9-10 “Anyone who has seen me, has seen the Father . . . the words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.”

And in regards to the Holy Spirit:

Genesis 1:2 “Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.”

Hebrews 9:14 “How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God.”

God is also unified in how his purposes are to be carried out:

Making Disciples:

In **Matthew 28:19**, Jesus told his disciples: “Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” <the noun *name* (singular) is used; not *names* (plural)>

Teaching Believers:

John 14:26 “But the Counselor, or the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.” <Holy Spirit will affirm words/work of Christ who affirms words/work of the Father>

Empowering Believers:

I Corinthians 12:4-6 “There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all people.” <All 3 work to equip the believer for service>

Saving Humanity:

I Peter 3:18 “For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit.” <All 3 were instrumental in the salvation plan for humanity>

The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are linked continuously throughout Scripture in who they are and in what they do. One God, three revelations.

And yet, even after looking at all these Scriptures, the concept of a 3 in 1 God is hard for the human mind to grasp. Even after years of hearing “In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit” through benedictions, doxologies, baptisms, and prayers, we still only see part of the mystery. It’s one of those mysteries that will always be . . . until that day we come face-to-face with God and can have all our questions answered.

Pastor James Leach says: “As human beings, we don’t like unsolvable mysteries. They tease us. Haunt us. Cry out to be solved. Now that we've become so advanced that we can put fax machines in cars and can send ourselves messages back from Venus, we are not really open to the suggestion that there are those things that always have been and always will be mysteries to us. We assume that our only limitations are time and energy, and, given enough of the two, there is really nothing we can't ultimately know.

So when we come to a doctrinal matter like the Trinity, the temptation is to want one neat analogy that will make it all clear, one concise statement on the Trinity that will settle it for us and allow us to move on to the next problem. But it's not that easy! It's not so simple to describe the Trinity in any meaningful way. The Trinity just isn't one of things we can settle in short order.” (James C. Leach, Naming God, Pulpit Digest, January / February 1991, p. 55.)

When asked about the mystery of the Trinity, Martin Luther said this: "To try to deny the Trinity endangers your salvation, to try to comprehend the Trinity endangers your sanity."

You may recall this ancient story about St. Augustine. One day he took a break from writing about the Trinity to take a walk along the seashore. There he came across a child with a little pail, intently scooping up a pail full of water out of the ocean, then walking up the beach and dumping it out into the sand, then going back down to scoop out another pail of water to pour into the sand, etc.

Augustine asked the child what he was doing, and the child explained that he was "emptying the sea out into the sand. "When the Bishop tried to gently point out the absurd impossibility of this task, the child replied, "Ah, but I'll drain the sea before you understand the Trinity." (King Duncan, Collected Sermons. www.Sermons.com)

There's truth to that child's comment. The Early Church and subsequent church leaders all through the centuries until today, have struggled to fully grasp the mystery of the Trinity. Volumes have been written on the subject!

In fact, Trinity Sunday was actually established in reaction to a non-trinitarian position that became popular during the 4th century. A controversy had arisen in the Christian Church: some people did not believe Jesus was equal with God. Therefore, founders of the early Christian church, with the aid of Emperor Constantine, thought it essential that the nature of God, and the belief in God be clarified. Most important was identifying and defining the Holy Trinity.

Principal advocates among the non-trinitarians were Arius and Eusebius. Arius, whose followers were called Arians, felt that Jesus was not one with the father, and that he was not fully, although almost, divine in nature. Therefore, worshipping Christ would be tantamount to worshipping another God, and this specifically went against God's teaching that he alone should be worshipped.

Arian's views were debated at the Council of Nicea where the majority of the church leaders said Scriptural authority promoted the divinity of Christ and the concept of Jesus. Arius refused to back down from his position and he was labeled a heretic & his work became known as the Arian Heresy. (www.wisegeek.com/what-was-the-arian-heresy.htm)

It was out of this council that the Nicene Creed was adopted, specifically to refute the Arian Heresy. It is a creed steeped in Trinitarian Language.

The Nicene Creed

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, the maker of heaven and earth, of things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the begotten of God the Father, the Only-begotten, that is of the essence of the Father. God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten and not made; of the very same nature of the Father, by Whom all things came into being, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible. Who for us humanity and for our salvation came down from heaven, was incarnate, was made human, was born perfectly of the holy virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit. By whom He took body, soul, and mind, and everything that is in man, truly and not in semblance. He suffered, was crucified, was buried, rose again on the third day, ascended into heaven with the same body, [and] sat at the right hand of the Father. He is to come with the same body and with the glory of the Father, to judge the living and the dead; of His kingdom there is no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, in the uncreated and the perfect; Who spoke through the Law, prophets, and Gospels; Who came down upon the Jordan, preached through the apostles, and lived in the saints.

We believe also in only One, Universal, Apostolic, and [Holy] Church; in one baptism in repentance, for the remission, and forgiveness of sins; and in the resurrection of the dead, in the everlasting judgment of souls and bodies, and the Kingdom of Heaven and in the everlasting life. Amen.

We see the Nicene Creed reaffirming the scriptures we read earlier: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are Co-equal, Co-eternal, and Co-workers in their united purpose.

**But what does reflection on the Trinity, the triune nature of God,
mean for you and me today?**

Obviously, not many of us sit around and debate the nature of God. Nor do we often hear of Church Councils being called to settle such weighty theological issues. And yet, almost every week in churches around the world, the phrase “In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” is being said. **Do you ever think about it? What it means? What it reveals to you about God?**

In the 15th century, there lived a Russian monk named Andrei Rublev. He became well-known as a painter of icons for the Russian Orthodox Church. What is a religious icon? Because icons are not the same thing as idols. At first glance, an icon looks like a picture or a painting, but it is more than just a portrayal of some reality. Its purpose is to reveal a sacred presence that is usually hidden from our human eyes.

Iconographers use a technique of “reverse perspective” which gives the effect of a telephoto lens, so that the subjects in the back loom larger than the subjects in the front. This creates the illusion that the picture is moving towards us. It approaches us. And, if we are in a place of simplicity, repentance and humility, than the Holy gracefully reveals its mysteries to us. We are not imposing our thoughts, views, or opinions on the painting—a critique we in the Western world use and inherited from the Renaissance—but we become receptive to what the painting brings to us, teaches us.

Andrei Rublev painted a picture called “The Trinity” that art critics call the greatest icon ever painted. It is a picture of three angels, none dominant, relating to each other in a flowing dynamic. A new church, under the patronage of the Princes of Moscow, was being built near his monastery. They had commissioned an Icon of the Most Holy Trinity.

Let me share with you Andrei’s story of how this icon came into being . . .

Andrei had just sanded the birchwood panel for his icon. A cloth canvas would now have to be glued on to the wood. Then the priming coats would be added. After that, the sketch would be drawn. And only after that would he begin to paint with the pigments.

As Andrei reflected on what he might place on the panel, he began thinking of Sergei, the founder of the Holy Trinity Monastery where he now lived. Sergei was said to have beheld the mystery of the Holy Trinity in a vision. The mystery of Divine Love. But could he, Andrei, paint it? And what would it look like?

Andrei opened a book on the life of Saint Sergei to see what he could glean from this man’s life. Perhaps it would inspire his creativity. He read out loud:

“Sergei lived a life of solitude and prayer. He would serve others: baking bread, cooking porridge, hiring himself out as a laborer when the brothers had no food. He loved the feel and smell of the wood, and he carved toys. He would give them to visitors to take home to their

children. And when they returned on another visit with their children, Sergei delighted in playing with them.”

Andrei paused, then murmured, “Simplicity. Sergei lived simply. He would want the Icon of the Trinity to be simple as well.”

He read some more:

“As an old man Sergei walked alone, on foot, to the distant city of Riazan where the volatile Prince Oleg refused to be reconciled to Prince Dimitri of Moscow. The old man spoke with great gentleness of peace and charity. Oleg’s anger gave way to meekness, and soon he was reconciled with Prince Dimitri.”

Andrei thought about this. “Yes! Of course. Reconciliation. Sergei brought peace and harmony to those who were estranged. The icon must do the same.”

Although he was tired, he decided to read some more.

“One day Sergei was summoned to Moscow. There he was told he would be made the next Bishop of Moscow. He would be the Spiritual Leader of all Russians. The golden jewel studded Cross of the Bishop was placed in Sergei’s hands. He looked at it briefly, and returned it quickly, saying: ‘I shunned gold for the sake of poverty when I was a youth. Now, I am an old man, and I gladly do the same.’ And Sergei returned to his hermitage deep in the forest.”

Andrei was deeply touched and said,

“Humility. Sergei humbled himself in his life as Christ humbled himself in his passion and death. The icon must show God’s humility so that our pride will not lead to strife.”

Andrei read from the book one last time that evening.

“And when asked how he named his monastery, Sergei said that he hoped that contemplation of the Holy Trinity would conquer the hateful fear of this world’s dissensions.”

Andrei Rublev closed the book and set it aside. He reflected on the themes of Simplicity, Reconciliation, and Humility. He contemplated the triune God, imagining all fear being conquered through God’s love. He searched his mind’s eye for the form and the colors of the Icon of the Holy Trinity, waiting for God to give him the image for his blank birchwood plank.

As he waited, he wished that angels would come and visit him as they had visited Sergei. The old monk Epifanio had seen them with his own eyes: not only in the woods, but in Church when Sergei had prayed at the altar.

Visions of angels swirled in Andrei’s imagination, and an image began to form. Andrei went to the birchwood plank and sketched three simple angels for his icon. Simple, for they all looked alike.

“Father, Son, Spirit, the Life-Creating Trinity,” Andrei murmured.

Old Epifanio had mentioned other visions: The cup that Sergei held at the altar, holding the sacrament of bread and wine, sometimes burned and flamed as the monks came together for communion.

On the icon, in the center of the three divine figures, Andrei drew a cup. He imagined painting it later: red with wine, red with blood, red with flames. Through the cup, the three would be in silent communion.

“Father, Son, Spirit, the Life-Creating Trinity.”

Andrei continued sketching. The sketch was almost done. “Simplicity in the Angelic Forms. Reconciliation in the faces and the gestures. Humility . . .” Andrei stopped, remembering that Sergei had humbly refused the Gold Cross placed in his hands. Andrei understood. “Refusing earthly gold, Sergei was bathed in the golden light of the Holy Trinity.”

He sketched some more. Andrei stepped back, his eyes opened wide in wonder. His mind’s eye filled with a burst of golden light. The birchwood plank was no longer blank. (Condensed version of *The Birchwood Icon* by Robert Bela Wilhelm, www.lectionarystorybook.com, 1996-2008.)

(Put up slide of Andrei’s Trinity of the 3 Angels)

Father, Son, Spirit, The Life-Giving Trinity.
Co-equal, co-eternal, united in a common purpose.
God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit.

If you want to be drawn into the mystery, into the wonder, into the love of the triune God, then I suggest, like Andrei, you reflect on Simplicity, Reconciliation, and Humility. And as you pray, act, and then love these three attitudes into your life, wait and expect to meet the triune God. Like Andrei, you will glimpse Truth, a piece of the mystery, and the joy will transform you.

How do you make the mystery of the Triune God real in your personal life?

The Celtic tradition is another that is steeped in the belief of the Threefold God. If you study their daily life, their daily prayers, you will find a set of values that speaks of harmony, unity, interrelationship, and interdependence.

A brief prayer from Ireland simply says:

O Father who sought me
O Son who bought me
O Holy Spirit who taught me.

When someone was to set out on a journey in Scotland, this prayer was offered:

God be with thee in every pass
Jesus be with thee on every hill
Spirit be with thee on every stream
 Headland and ridge and lawn.

Each sea and land, each moor and meadow
Each lying down, each rising up
In the trough of the waves, on the crest of the billows
 Each step of the journey thou goest.

Children were taught of the Trinity from the moment of birth. In Ireland, women would gather around the newborn child and sing:

A small drop of water
To thy forehead, beloved
Meet for the Father, Son and Spirit
The Triune of power.

A small drop of water
To encompass my beloved
Meet for the Father, Son and Spirit
The Triune of power.

A small drop of water
To fill thee with each grace
Meet for the Father, Son and Spirit
The Triune of power

What do these prayers teach us? That every aspect of our daily life can be wrapped up in our worship and adoration of the Triune God. That God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit can permeate each moment of who we are and what we do.

Like the Celtic people, everything we touch, every tool we handle, can be done with respect and reverence; every activity can be performed with a sense of the presence of God, indeed done in partnership with him. This is how we can begin to discover the triune God today: Through praise upon waking, praise through gardening, praise through driving to our workplace, praise through the preparation of meals, praise through the bathing of our children, praise through the creative work of art or music, praise through having coffee with a friend . . . all of these and more can lead you into the presence of God, Son and Spirit.

In **Jeremiah 29:13**, God said, “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”

Let me close with this final prayer:

God with me lying down
God with me rising up
God with me in each ray of light
Nor I a ray of joy without Him,
Nor one ray without Him.

Christ with me sleeping
Christ with me waking
Christ with me watching
Every day and night
Every day and night.

God with me protecting
The Lord with me directing
The Spirit with me strengthening
For ever and for evermore
Ever and evermore, Amen.

(The Celtic Way of Prayer: The Recovery of the Religious Imagination by Esther de Waal. Image Book, Doubleday: New York. 1997.

Other Resources Used for this Sermon:

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A Theology of the New Testament by George Eldon Ladd. Eerdmans Publishing Co.: Michigan, 1974.

Lectures in Systematic Theology by Henry C. Thiessen. Eerdmans Publishing Co.: Michigan, 1979 revised.

The Word of Truth by Dale Moody. "The Nature of God: Unity and Trinity." Eerdmans Publishing Co.: Michigan, 1981. pages 89-99.