

What Is the Trinity and Why Does It Matter?

(Matthew 28:16-20, 2 Corinthians 13:11-13, Trinity Sunday A)

Asking For a Friend Summer sermon series

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As some of you know, I am an introvert. Most people are surprised by this. I remember one person even telling me I was wrong ... about myself. Many associate introverts with shyness. However, introversion and extroversion are where one gets their energy. Extroverts are energized by being with people. Introverts are energized by being alone. Don't misunderstand. I love people. If not, I'm in the wrong occupation. But to refill my bucket and renew, I need time alone.

For many years, my parents have provided me with an annual birthday vacation I affectionately call my "introvert intermission." I go away for five to six days, all by myself. Other than the person at the front desk at check-in, I speak to almost no one for the duration of my vacation. And it is glorious.

Usually, the condos where I stay have a balcony, and on that balcony, will be a little bistro table with two chairs in the corners and two at the table. This is a photo from one of my trips. I remember sitting there on one of the earlier trips and thinking about the number of chairs. Three extra seats. Three. Hmmm. So, I moved the other two chairs over to the table, making room for four, and began to imagine the Trinity sitting with me. God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Plus, me. All four chairs were filled. It seemed right. And so, a tradition began. Each trip, I savor my table time with the Trinity.

Honestly, I think part of my love of sitting with the Trinity rather than just one person of the Trinity is because I am an introvert. With the Trinity, I don't need to make conversation all the time. I can sit back, enjoy breakfast, and let the Trinity talk. I often imagine them laughing, reminiscing, and dropping wisdom. I was included, but there was no pressure to do anything other than be present with God in God's fullness.

But mostly love time with the Trinity because we're made for relationships. Yes, even introverts. The Trinity reminds us that we have a relational God who created us in God's image; thus, we are made for relationships, too.

David Gushee describes it this way, "To say that God is triune is to mean that God is social in nature. It is also to say that those made in the image of God are likewise intrinsically social. There is one God, and the unity of this one God is absolute, yet this God is described in Scripture as three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."¹

I learned that this idea of the "Trinity-at-the-table-with-an-empty-seat" was not new. Perhaps the seed was planted in my mind years ago in seminary, but I've forgotten.

This Trinity Icon is a panel painting written in the early 15th century by the Russian monk-artist Andrei Rublev. It is probably the most famous of all Russian religious paintings. In this icon of the Trinity, we see three figures in unity at the table with the front exposed and open, inviting the viewer to come and sit with them, engage with them, and share the hospitality of the table.

All three illustrated figures possess identical features. This is not a mistake: the three persons of the Trinity are identical, each fulfilling their own particular role or persona. The way the figures turn to each other and incline their heads, and the shaping of the figures within the painting, the positioning of their arms creates a very circular pattern of unity. Even at first glance, the icon proclaims God as a trinity in unity, three distinct yet united persons.

Three, yet one.

The doctrine of the Trinity is admittedly difficult to understand. Maybe you, or rather a friend, have questions about the Trinity and why it matters. Well, I'm glad you asked, whether for you or a friend.

We have to start with a brief history of where the idea of Trinity comes from, so stick with me for a bit. You will not see the word "Trinity" in the Bible. The ancient and crucial teaching of the Trinity arose out of early Christian reflection on scripture, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. A few early Church Fathers were trying to articulate the Threefold nature of God as experienced and described in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament.

For his earliest followers, encountering Jesus was somehow encountering God directly – at the same time, Jesus spoke of God as both distinct from him and yet one with him. Likewise, early disciples experienced encounters with the Spirit as encounters with God directly – and at the same time, Jesus spoke of the Spirit as a guiding, challenging presence distinct from him and God. And so, over time, the church's doctrine of the Trinity developed the idea that God is accurately regarded as both Three and One. Not three Gods – for that would miss God's oneness. And not merely One – for that would miss God's threeness.

Clear as mud? You're not alone. The early church struggled with this and debated it for nearly 400 years. It is challenging. Many have tried to create analogies and metaphors but failed to capture the idea of the Trinity. The problem with using analogies to explain the Holy Trinity is that you always end up confessing some ancient heresy or false belief.

You may have heard the Trinity analogy related to a person's different roles in their life. For example, I am simultaneously a daughter, a pastor, and an aunt. But this analogy fails because it implies there is one God who takes on three different forms or modes – Father, Son, and Spirit. This is a heresy called "modalism." This ignores the unique personhood of each member of the Trinity.

Or the one analogy about how the Trinity is like the sun, light, and heat, but that also falls short. It implies Jesus and the Holy Spirit are created by God and lesser than God, like the sun produces light and heat, but they are not the sun. This is a heresy called Arianism.

There are a few more heretical takes on the Trinity as we struggle to try and understand and communicate it. When we preach on the Trinity, most pastors are praying we don't add to the bad takes, for it is easy to do. For a humorous take on all of the heresies of the Trinity, search on Youtube for "St. Patrick's Bad Analogies" for 3.5 minutes of satire.

The Trinity is a mystery beyond our human reason and comprehension. We need to be more comfortable with this and embrace mystery. The Trinity requires faith and trust that God is one being in three persons known as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We confess that each distinct Person is God and Lord and that the deity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is One, equal in glory, co-equal in majesty.

Now that that is settled, why does it matter? What does the doctrine of the Trinity have to do with the daily struggles and challenges we and our world face?

Perhaps, our text today can help us understand better.

Paul had spent at least two years with the young congregation he planted in the city of Corinth. He wrote them often and visited them at least a few times on his travels. Corinth was a bit of a problem child for Paul. The Corinthians' fellowship was fractured. They were fussing and divided. They'd been led astray by traveling preachers, who challenged Paul's authority and taught some questionable teachings and doctrine. There was conflict, deep division, and immorality within the church. Paul has written some very harsh words in his letters to try and set them straight once again and defend all he had taught them as truth.

Our text today comes at the end of Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth. Paul softens a bit to end with words of encouragement and a genuine, love-sourced appeal for them to know and do better and to be one.

"Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss." vv.11-12 NRSVU

Paul is saying, Come on now. Get it together. Get along with one another, and be at peace. Even if you don't agree on everything – even important things, you can be unified and be at peace. Paul says to forgive one another, for only in forgiveness could you greet one another with a holy kiss. When we fought with our siblings growing up, a parent would tell them to apologize and shake hands, or friends told to hug it out after a fight.

Paul says if you do these things, you will experience the love and peace of God with you because God is a relationship-oriented God. God is communal; God thrives on relationships, even within God's Self—perfect oneness and harmony. We are to be so as well.

After Paul's final words of heartfelt advice to those he loved deeply, he concludes with a powerful benediction. "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you." v.13 Paul's words in verse 13 of the NRSVUE translation are as close as we get to a Trinitarian statement in the New Testament. If you have another translation of scripture, it may be marked as verse 14.

Paul usually ends his letters with benedictions that only mention Christ's grace. But at the end of 2 Corinthians, he expands the resources available to this congregation in Corinth, who are deeply divided and troubled. It is almost as if Paul wants them to know – what you face is difficult, but you are not alone. The fullness of God – the love of God, the grace of Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit is with you. Paul wrote to believers struggling with failure, temptation, pride, bad habits, guilt, shame, and disagreements. In v. 13, he said, "You need all the resources of God's Trinitarian fullness to help you! Your ordinary lives need the extraordinary power of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." You need the grace of Jesus. You need the love of God. You need the Holy Spirit's power to create and sustain the fellowship of the church that God calls us to.

I think Paul is intentional about ordering v. 13, my favorite benediction. The grace of Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship/communion of the Holy Spirit. We start with what we know. God isn't some far-off concept or harsh judge. God has broken into history and come to heal, forgive, and die on the Cross. And then be raised. Once that is established, we know God loves us. Nothing can change that. And all of this is made real by the Holy Spirit, the sustainer, the fellowship-fixer, the perpetual relationship healer.

The doctrine of the Trinity is about a God living and active in our lives at every turn. It moves us from a God up there to a God "up there, down here, and everywhere," creating, redeeming, and empowering creation at every turn. In brief, the doctrine is ultimately about a world saturated with divine presence and a God "in whom we live, and move, and have our being." (Acts 17:28)

Whenever you are in a restaurant, in a home, or on the balcony of a condo and you find a table, you know what you will rarely find? An odd number of chairs. For some of my OCD friends, this is a huge relief. For a family of five, it can be a challenge. For a single person, it can be a painful reminder.

A person years ago reflected that as a single person, she always noticed the number of chairs around someone's dining table. If it's an odd number of chairs – she knew that if she were ever invited over, she would fit in and belong there. She knew her presence wouldn't bring with it a sense of lack, as one chair sits awkwardly empty, or she knew that her company wouldn't get burdened, as all the other chairs are filled with couples, but an extra non-matching chair needs to be brought up from the basement just for her. An odd number of chairs at the table tells her they are ready for anything. Ready for any kind of configuration of a group. She knew they had made room for her. " ii

Maybe God is an odd number because, somehow, an odd number has a way of always leaving room for more. An odd number makes us stop and reconsider our plans to see if it works for everyone. An even number says, "We're complete. There is no more room." An odd number says, "We have to listen and share, and work together and make room for each other in ways we hadn't imagined. Which means we can make room for you. Come. Look, there's room at the table here for you." iii

There was an even number of chairs at my balcony table. But thankfully, there was an odd God who made room for me. That's God as Trinity – an odd trio with so much love shared between them that they want nothing more than to make room for others and invite them in.

Words will always fail us when we talk about the doctrine of the Trinity. No image or metaphor can fully express God as three in one. But we are invited to embrace the mystery.

If you heard nothing else this morning, hear this: With all the brokenness and division in and around us, we need the very fullness of the Triune God up there, down here, and everywhere to teach and empower us to be in relationship with God and one another. When we embrace our relationship with the Holy Trinity, an odd community that freely and joyfully makes space for others by God's very nature, we will also learn to make room for others. Come to the table. There is always a place open for you.

ⁱ *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, vol. 3 of Accordance electronic ed. [Westminster John Knox Press, 2011], para. 13239.]

ⁱⁱ <https://jdshankles.wordpress.com/2022/06/12/sunday-june-12th-2022-an-odd-bunch-a-sermon-on-the-holy-trinity/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Grateful to Jonathan Davis for the idea of the "oddity" of God.