

**We Believe: God is Community**  
2 Corinthians 13:14, Matt 3:16-17

Good morning! This has been a crazy week, hasn't it? We started Lent with a wonderful Ash Wednesday supper and worship, but a lot of my attention has been on the corona virus. Part of the challenge is that we are struggling to learn the facts--the truth about what we are dealing with. When a new disease appears, we don't know much if anything about it. We have to learn how it is transmitted, how contagious it is, how to treat it, whether we can develop a vaccine. Getting answers to all of those questions takes time and data.

So far it appears that the corona virus is more contagious than our typical flu bugs, but much less contagious than a cold or the measles. And it appears to be more lethal than the flu, but at the same time, many people who get it have only minor symptoms and recover with really no treatment. We are still learning more about this virus and how to deal with it.

How we respond to something depends on knowing the facts about it. While we are still discovering more about the corona virus (and while we are still in the flu season) it is important to take sensible precautions. Wash your hands. A lot—Alice reminds me, 20 seconds! Please stay home if you are sick. Don't be afraid to greet people with a warm smile and nod rather than shake hands or hug. Did I mention wash your hands? It is great that we have an actual expert on infectious diseases in our congregation—Dr. Vic MacIntosh. He will be sharing about what we really know about this virus and how to protect ourselves—that will be happening two weeks from today, on March 15, after the 11 o'clock service.

Knowing the truth about something is critical to how we respond to it, isn't it? So—what is true about God? That's our topic today. I want to share a central, unique truth about God that impacts our life today.

Take a moment and imagine what God is like. Are you seeing a picture? Feeling a feeling? Once I heard theologian Tom Wright talking about meeting with undergrad students. He would frequently hear something like this—"I used to believe in God, but as I grew up it became harder and harder for me to believe in him." Wright would say: "Tell me about this god

you don't believe in." They'd respond: "You know—an old man, up, away someplace in the sky. He is so far removed from all the pain and suffering here in the world. He doesn't seem to care, in fact, he is apparently just angry and out to get us. I can't believe in a god like that." Wright—a Bible teacher and Anglican priest—would surprise them by saying "I don't believe in that god either!" These students assumed that their picture of an angry god in the sky was the God of the Bible. But they were mistaken.

I think most people who reject God are rejecting a false image of God like that one. Their *reaction* to God is wrong because their *understanding* of God is wrong.

Wright would follow up with the students by saying "The God I believe in is the God that I see in the middle of the pain and the suffering down here in the world." We learn about God by studying Jesus and God's Holy Spirit guides us as we do that. We discover that the real God is not far away. He is down in the mess with us. He is as close as our breath. This God is available and involved in our everyday, sometimes really fouled up lives.

Today we're starting a series running up to Easter called We Believe. We'll look at the core ideas that we believe as Christians. Applying those truths can change us. We can live happier, more meaningful, more fulfilled lives. Today we start with a key truth about the real God. The God we learn about in the Bible. This truth is unique to Christianity. No other faith thinks this. Here it is: This one God is made up of 3 persons. He is a Trinity, 3 in 1. Don't let Trinity throw you for a loop—you can use the word community instead—God is a community. God is a community of loving relationships between the Father, the Son and the Spirit. **(slide up)** That is always how it has been. They are all one God but not the same as each other. Don't worry about completely grasping this—the great teacher J.I. Packer said that all truths about God exceed our comprehension. All truths about God exceed our comprehension. But think about this—the reality of the Trinity means that God is not alone. God was never alone. And God made us so we can join in that loving relationship which Father, Son and Spirit have always enjoyed. Can you imagine? God wants us to join in his family! Not some big, faceless, anonymous family, but a close, loving family. That is what he wants for you—today and always.

The Trinity—this loving community—is not 3 Gods, it is ONE God. It is one God revealed in 3 persons. It is not three different masks that God switches around. It is three persons

united in one God. The 3 persons of the trinity—Father, Son and Spirit—are all God, they are all eternal, they are all totally powerful. They always work together. Frederick Buechner says that the doctrine of the Trinity is fundamentally about the fact that there is only one God. He says “Father, Son and Holy Spirit mean that the mystery beyond us, the mystery among us, and the mystery within us are all the same mystery.” The mystery beyond us—the Father, the mystery among us—the Son, and the mystery within us—the Spirit, are all the same mystery. God is within us, around us and beyond us, and he is all the same one God. **(slide down)**

The Old Testament has hints about the Trinity, but the picture doesn't really start to come into focus until Jesus arrives in the New Testament. Even then the word Trinity is never used. We start with Jesus—who keeps doing and saying things that only God can do or say. He acts like God, but he also talks about his Father in Heaven and prays to the Father. Suddenly we have two names for one God. Later Jesus started talking about sending the Spirit or the Comforter or Advocate that you heard about a few weeks ago. We discover that this Person is *also* behaving like God. He also seems to be a person—he can be grieved, he can be sinned against, he acts, he inspires people.

In our readings today we have two clear examples of the Trinity. First, we read together Paul's blessing to the church in Corinth. His words might sound familiar to you—may the Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you. Paul gave them a blessing using the 3 names of the Trinity. In our second reading, All three persons of the Trinity were at Jesus' baptism. They were actively involved –Jesus in the water, the Spirit descending on Him, and the Father speaking—this is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.

At the very end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus talks about the Trinity explicitly. He gave us the great commission. Do you remember it? “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.” In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Name, not names. Three people with one name.

The Bible reveals the truth that God is one. It shows that the Father, the Son Jesus, and the Spirit are all distinct and yet all that one God. **(slide up)** This is a Celtic symbol of the Trinity that is helpful to me. Three arcs make up one symbol that has 3 leaves. The leaves are all

somehow connected to each other and they can't be pulled apart. Sometimes people put a **(next slide)** circle intertwined in it to emphasize the unity among the threeness.

A blogger tells of hearing Pastor Eugene Peterson, the translator of the Message, answer a question about the Trinity. Pastor Eugene said when he was a young seminary student he and his friends liked to go square dancing. Eugene wasn't a very good or very confident dancer, so he'd often watch from the sidelines. He'd see the people join hands, swap partners, circle up, dosie do. As the dance speeded up, which they always seemed to do, the individual dancers became almost indistinguishable—just a blur of movement and motion. At some point, Peterson said, a hand would reach out and grab him and pull him into the dance. All of a sudden he'd be dancing! He was dancing not because he was particularly good at it, but because he was with those who knew how to dance. (repeat)

Life with God is like that, Peterson said. God is love and God loves us. Father, Son and Spirit have existed eternally in a community of love, they created the universe at the beginning of time out of that love, and they invite us to live our lives in that love.

Love and relationships define us—and the ultimate love and most important relationships we can have are with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That image of dancing is perfect for how the Trinity interacts—they give and take, ebb and flow, step up and step back—not in competition but in coordination and joy and creativity. In fact, the Greek word the church uses for this relationship basically means to dance—perichoresis. The idea is that the Trinity all act together but remain distinct from each other. Jesus prayed that we would join in this dance—he said “may they (all us believers) be one, as you Father are in me and I am in you, may they be one in us.”

Wow—God is not a distant, angry man in the sky—he is a loving community and he wants us to join in. To be as intimately connected as you can imagine. This is why the Bible constantly uses the picture of marriage to talk about the relationship between God and his people—he wants it to be as loving, as intimate, as joy filled, as fulfilling as the best marriage you can imagine. **(slide down)**

The Trinity has always been part of what defines an orthodox or traditional Christian. The Apostles' Creed is one of our earliest witnesses to this. Look at the beige insert in your

bulletin. The Creed is short—some of you probably memorized it at some point. It has 3 paragraphs—one about the Father, one about the Son, and one about the Spirit. The Trinity is the outline of the Creed!

By the way—the Apostles’ Creed grew from our very earliest statements of faith. This was not written by a church council or a bunch of theologians, it organically grew out of what the church did—it is from the grass roots. This kind of creed was already an old tradition by the 100s. As believers taught new disciples—just like we are doing with our youth right now—the Creed is what they were taught. Then when those new believers were baptized, the Creed was what they said to show they were ready to be baptized. They were following Jesus’ great commission to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

This Creed is mere Christianity. It is what ALL Christians in ALL places, of ALL denominations, have ALWAYS agreed on. Generation after generation believers have agreed—yes, this is right. This is what the Bible teaches—this is our faith—it is TRUE. Like the song quote at the bottom of your insert says—“I did not make it, no it is making me. It is the very truth of God, not the invention of any man.” We don’t believe the Trinity because we like the idea, we believe it because the Bible shows us that it is what the One True God is really like. It is the basic truth about God. God is not a loner, God is a community. God exists as love between Father Son and Spirit.

The Gospel is God’s love in action for our benefit. The Father made us and chooses us, Jesus the Son rescues us, and the Holy Spirit transforms us so we can be with God. And the Trinity doesn’t just save us—The Trinity also shows us what our lives are for *after* we’re saved. The Trinity is a community of love—and it invites us to join in their dance of love. God’s goal has always been to include us in that loving community. He made us to live with Him, now and always!

That means your life is not an accident. It is not driven by mindless forces. You live in a universe that is permeated with love. A universe that was made *in order that* you could live with God the Trinity. Do you feel lonely sometimes? That is because we were made for love and for community. That is our destiny, that is what Jesus prayed for, and that is what God’s Spirit is trying to create among us right now. Being the church together means creating a

community of love today where each of us is supported, encouraged and sent out to share God's love with a hurting, broken world.

First Pres, that is our job. We are made to live in that close relationship with God and to reflect that love out into the world. Eugene Peterson says that God never sees us as spectators. There is always a hand reaching out to pull us into the energetically active life of God—into the Trinitarian actions of holy creation, holy salvation and holy community. We are made to be together. We are made to care for one another. We are made to dance and to invite others to join in the dance. Don't be afraid, it doesn't matter if you don't think you are a good dancer-- you are with those who know how to dance!

Let's Pray—Holy God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—you are a mystery to us. You are far above us and somehow also as close as our breath. You speak through ancient texts of Scripture and also inside our hearts. Help us to listen to you. Help us to join in your great dance of love.

In Jesus' name we ask it, who rules with you and the Holy Spirit, One God, Amen.