

“Confirmation for Everyone: The Trinity”
First Presbyterian Church of Salt Lake City
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This morning, we continue in our series, “Confirmation for Everyone,” by digging into the heady, theological doctrine of the Trinity. The trinity is the mind-bending, mysterious understanding of God as three-in-one. God is one God, but God is also known in the three distinct persons of the trinity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. It is a theology that declares a different sort of math... where $1+1+1$ does not actually equal 3... but rather $1+1+1= 1$. Yet, the trinity is not a mathematical problem to be solved, but rather a mystery to be held and confessed.

And so, we sing **“Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God almighty... God in three persons, blessed trinity.”** And we confess in the creed, **“I believe in God, the Father Almighty... and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord...and I believe in the Holy Spirit.”** And we mark our baptisms and many of our prayers **“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”** -**Matt 28:19** And each week in worship we respond to our forgiveness by singing the Gloria, **“Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost.”** We often hear a trinitarian benediction as we depart, **“May the God who is for you, and the son who is with you, and the Spirit who is within you be with you this day and everyday.”** Or sometimes it’s this one: **“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you.”** -**2 Cor 13:13**

We confess the great mystery of the trinity all the time. But do we really know what we mean when we speak or sing these words? Do they make a difference in our everyday lives? I mean, you might find yourself thinking this morning, “so what?” And that might make sense. Because if someone you love is hurting right now, you probably don’t care too much about making sense of the trinity. If you are struggling with a serious personal or family matter, the trinity might not be that interesting to you today. If your business is in trouble or you’re unhappy in your employment, the history of the council of Nicaea will probably not help much. If one of your kids is in trouble, or you’re headed for a divorce, or caring for an aging parent, or anxious about your finances... it might not matter to you that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit... uncreated, incomprehensible. Three consubstantial persons, three expressions of the divine in

hypostatic union. One God in three distinct persons, yet one in substance, essence, and nature. It's true, it's a lot of heady theology.

But if you're suffering today, you probably just want to know that God is real, that God is paying attention to your life, and that God is with you in all that you're facing today. You want to know that God cares, that God loves you.

So why focus on the trinity today? Why does it matter that we explore this mystery?

All sorts of great thinkers have tried for centuries to explain the trinity by using illustrations that might help us understand how God can be three-in-one, one-in-three. Just like Dave did this morning with our children's sermon, people have tried to use well-known metaphors to help us understand who God is. Many have compared the trinity to water in its different states: liquid-vapor-frozen forms... all water but all distinct forms. Some have used an egg: with its shell-yoke-white. All different forms yet still all an egg. And apple or avocado works well too: with the skin-meat-seed. Augustine preferred to compare the trinity to a tree—with its roots-trunk-branches—and wrote, **"Each are in each, and all in each, and each in all, and all are one."**

But all the explanations, all the metaphors, all the answers to the questions about the Trinity are just our frail human attempts to describe something that simply cannot be fully described. In fact, you should know that the word "trinity" **Tri (three) nity (unity)** is not actually found in the Bible. It's just the word that has been most helpful to try and describe the one God of Scripture who is present and at work in three distinct but unified ways. We find this triune God revealed all throughout the scriptures, from Genesis to Revelation. But even still, it can be so hard to make sense of this mystery.

One writer put it this way, **"The greatest minds of Christendom have applied reason, philosophical rigor, depth and breadth to understanding and interpreting the church's experience of "Father" "Son" and "Holy Spirit". But in the end, knowing God is as elusive as predicting a firefly's trajectory over a field of hay after dusk, as futile**

as keeping track of a drop of rain fallen into the ocean in a storm, as blinding as gazing directly at the sun.” (Suzanne Guthrie, *Edge of Enclosure*)

Really, the best any of us can do is describe what our particular, personal experience of God is like – how it sounds, how it feels, what it reminds us of. But even this is complicated. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, **“The problem is that it is rarely the same experience twice in a row. Some days God comes as a judge, walking through our lives wearing white gloves and exposing all the messes we have made. Other days God comes as a shepherd, fending off our enemies and feeding us by hand. Some days God comes as a whirlwind who blows all our certainties away. Other days God comes as a brooding hen who hides us in the shelter of her wings. Some days God comes as a dazzling monarch and other days as a silent servant. If we were to name all the ways God comes to us, the list would go on forever: God the teacher, the challenger, the helper, the stranger, God the lover, the adversary, the yes and the no.”** (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way*)

So, what do we do with this mystery? Does it really matter that we try and understand the doctrine of the trinity when it can feel as futile as staring directly into the sun? My answer would be a resounding “yes!” Because, grappling with the mystery of the trinity helps us come to understand and know who God is, what God is like... which then in turn helps us understand how God is at work in this world, and what God thinks about us. And that can change everything.

Now let me be clear here, lest we get lost in all the mystery and lose the forest for the trees as they say... friends, it’s not so much that it’s important to “believe in” the doctrine of the trinity (or any other theological doctrine, for that matter) ... What matters is that we believe in the Living God. Believing in God is all that matters. Or let me put it this way... having a perfect understanding of the trinity is not so important... but knowing and loving the triune God is absolutely essential. The doctrine of trinity exists as a tool, to help us make sense of who this Living, Triune God is... this God who reveals the Godself as Father, Son, and Spirit. God, who is somehow, three-in-one.

Theologian Shirley Guthrie writes that **“The same God who is God over us as God the Father and Creator, and God with and for us as the incarnate Word and Son,**

is also God in and among us as God the Holy Spirit. One God in three persons means a personal God who lives and works in three different ways at the same time.”

This is less about trying to explain some great mystery... as it is about preserving a mystery that cannot be fully explained. When we think about God the Father, we think of God the loving creator, ruler, protector, preserver of all the world. This is about the God who is FOR us. When we think of God the Son, we think of the self-giving work of Jesus Christ to reconcile, save, and redeem all that has been lost. This is about the God who is WITH us. And when we think about the Spirit of God, we think of Spirit’s work to renew and transform this broken world, and to empower us with the gifts of God. This is about the God who is WITHIN and AMONG us. And though there are clearly distinctions in the way each person of the trinity reveals God, it is important that we remember that ALL of God is involved in everything God does.

One of the best ways our Greek ancestors helped make sense of this, was by referring to the Trinity as ***perichoresis*** (or *circumincessio* in Latin). The word perichoresis comes from two Greek words, peri, which means “around” (as in perimeter) and choresis, (as in choreography) which is translated as “rotating” or “a going around” or “encircling” or “to dance.” This Greek word is worth learning because it gives us a profoundly beautiful image of God. The three persons of the trinity are like three dancers in harmony. Pastor Eugene Peterson describes perichoresis this way, **“Imagine a folk dance, a round dance, with three partners in each set. The music starts up and the partners holding hands begin moving in a circle. On signal from the caller, they release hands, change partners, and weave in and out, swinging first one and then another. The tempo increases, the partners move more swiftly with and between and among one another, swinging and twirling, embracing and releasing, holding on and letting go. But there is no confusion, every movement is cleanly coordinated in precise rhythms, as each person maintains his or her own identity.”** (Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten thousand Places*)

It is quite a stunning image; God alive and active, in perfect harmony and movement. Even more, within the perichoresis of the trinity’s whirling dance, is an invitation for each of us. An invitation to participate with God in this divine dance. We are not to be mere spectators but are called to be involved in this circling movement.

There are always hands reaching out to pull us in, to be an active participant in this loving relationship that is the triune God.

In 1 John: 4:13-16, we get a glimpse of this dance at work... as John describes what it is to join the perichoresis... **“We know that we abide in Christ and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So, we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.”**

Friends, the trinity matters, because we have the promise of a loving God in all three divine manifestations... and this is particularly relevant on the days when we are sitting in these pews feeling isolated, angry, depressed, grieving, hopeless, fearful, anxious, wounded, ashamed, tired, lost. No matter what we might face today, we are not alone... because our God is a God of community, of perichoresis, of relationship... and this God will never leave us or forsake us. While we may not be able to know God fully on this side of eternity, God has revealed Godself to us in the trinity. And even more, as those who have chosen to love and serve God, we remember Jesus’ prayer for us, **“That you may all be one, even as the Father is in me, and I in Him, and that you may also be in us. And that the love with which the Father loves me, and I love him, will also be in you.”** -John 17

God is over us: as a creator, as a parent, as the source of life, as provider, as a righteous judge. Bigger and more powerful than we can ever imagine and God is for us. And yet God is also with us: as a friend, as a healer, as a teacher, as a human being who knows our pain and suffering, knows our struggles and celebrations. God is revealed in Jesus, who is with us. And that same God is also within us: as our new life, as our guide, leading and comforting us through all the changes and challenges life brings. As our inspiration, as the one who empowers and sustains us. God is revealed in the Holy Spirit, among and within us.

God: three in one. God for us, with us, and within us in love.

Thanks be to God the Father, to God the Son, and to God the Holy Spirit. Amen.