

“Great Things Come in Three”

John 10:22-42

[1] Welcome, prayer

[2] Three men are out golfing one day. As they approach the first tee, they notice there is a pond about 100 yards in front of them. It being a short hole, the first man takes out an iron, and smacks the ball, which heads directly toward the water. Just as the ball is about to take a dive, the man raises his club in the air, and miraculously, the waters part to let the ball roll on through and up to the green.

The second man turns to the first man and says, “Nice shot, Moses.”

Now it’s his turn to hit. Again, the second man takes an iron and swings, and again the ball heads straight for the pond. The second man speaks some words in a loud voice, and instead of dropping into the water, the ball rolls on top of the water, straight to the green.

Moses turns to the second man and says, “Nice shot, Jesus.”

It’s the third man’s turn. Strangely, he takes out a driver, and proceeds to whack the golf ball so hard, it not only clears the pond, it goes completely over the green and lands in a field, out of bounds. The ball rolls to a stop in front of a small hole. A gopher pops up and grabs the ball in his mouth. He is about to go back down his hole, when an eagle swoops down and grabs the gopher in his talons. As the eagle is flying back across the golf course, suddenly, a lightning bolt strikes the eagle. Startled, the eagle drops the gopher, who in turn drops the ball. The ball lands on the green and rolls right into the cup.

Jesus turns to the third man and says, “Nice shot, Dad.”

I wish I could tell you there is good theological content to that joke, but aside from a few biblical references, it really is just supposed to make you laugh, and maybe help you start thinking in threes.

[3] Today is Trinity Sunday, a lesser known holiday in the Christian calendar when we focus on the triune nature of God. The mystery of the Christian faith is this: we believe in One God, revealed in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Now, I have to admit, preaching on the Trinity is not for the faint of heart. In fact, umcdiscipleship.org even advises, “It is not the task of the preacher on Trinity Sunday to explain the Trinity. Resist the urge to find the perfect metaphor to explain God in a way that satisfies everyone listening. It won’t work.”¹

What can I say? I’m a rebel saved by grace. Today I do want to preach on the Trinity.

But before I break down a bit of seminary for you, let me clarify: I am not about to dissect, analyze, and formulate God. In no way do I intend to completely explain the Trinity to you today. Instead, I want to tell you about a mystery of our faith, and then ask the all-important question, So What? Why does it matter that we even know about the Trinity?

So that’s where we are headed, if the Spirit blesses me and I do my job right.

[4] In my confirmation class this fall, we talked about how the doctrine of the Trinity is one of the basic foundations of the Christian faith, and it is unique among all other world religions. We believe in one God who exists in three persons, commonly called the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Trinity teaches us that God is inherently relational. The Father, Son, and Spirit are co-equal and intimately connected to each other in a way we cannot comprehend. Because God is relational, we can understand why God created us and desires a relationship with us. It’s who God is.

When Dr. Peter Belini taught my evangelism class at United Seminary, he started with a lengthy discussion of the Trinity and the Incarnation. He explained, this is the primary way God communicates with us. So for us to successfully communicate the gospel to others, we need to have a basic grasp of the nature of God. If we start evangelizing from the basis of any other topic, be it sin, church, philosophy, or even scripture, we are not at the true starting point.

So, if we can’t use analogies like three-leaf clovers or models of water or eggs or anything else in creation, what can we say about the Trinity?

¹ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/when-the-spirit-moves/trinity-sunday-year-b-lectionary-planning-notes/trinity-sunday-year-b-preaching-notes>

[5] Firstly, the persons of the Trinity are distinct: Jesus is not the Father, the Holy Spirit is not Jesus, and the Father is not the Holy Spirit. The distinction between the persons is as real as the distinction between any of us. And yet, we affirm that the persons of the Trinity are of one substance. They are all equally God, eternal, omniscient, all-powerful.

Locked into this relationship is an intimacy that we cannot comprehend. The Father is the eternal origin of the Son. The Son is eternally begotten of the Father. The Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father through the Son.

Don't try to do the math. Normal logic won't help here. The important thing to know is that this cycle of love is eternal and unending. There is never a separation, never a divide, never an argument or a power struggle in the Trinity. It is the most perfect relationship, ever.

Wouldn't it be great if the closeness God expresses in the Trinity could be a model for the church? No, we can't be the Trinity, but what if we could model our own relationships with that kind of intimacy and equality in mind? The Trinity could be our springboard for building relationships with others.

[6] Now, even though the word “Trinity” isn't actually mentioned in the Bible, there are glimpses of the doctrine in several places. We read one of them today in John 10. We get to listen in on an argument between Jesus and the Jewish leaders. By the way, when John uses the term “the Jews”, he is talking about the Jewish opposition to Jesus. After all, Jesus and his disciples were Jewish, and many Jews did end up believing in Jesus.

In John 10, the Jewish leaders corner Jesus in the temple and demand, “If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” (John 10:24) They simply wouldn't believe Jesus was who he said he was.

Jesus' response is basically, “I told you who I am. I did miracles in the Father's name. My followers know who I am, but you don't.” Then Jesus drops this little bombshell: “The Father and I are one.” (John 10:30)

We know Jesus is being serious, because the Jewish leaders pick up stones to kill him. For Jesus to say he is one with God is the highest form of blasphemy in Judaism. They thought Jesus was only a man. No sane person would also claim to be God.

The argument continues for a bit, and Jesus quotes their own scripture to them to prove his point. He claims to be God’s Son, and does miracles to back up his claim. And then once more, he insists, “The Father is in me, and I in the Father.” (John 10:38)

[7] I just want to point out that those two statements reveal the paradox of the whole doctrine of the Trinity. How can Jesus both be “one with the Father” and “in the Father”? Short answer: I don’t know. That’s why it’s a mystery.

The longer answer is, Jesus is so intimate with the Father that they operate in complete unity. The same is true of the Holy Spirit. Jesus says of the Holy Spirit, “He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you.” (John 16:14)

Is your mind blown yet? They probably were right that no preacher should cover the Trinity in a sermon, yet I’m too late to stop now.

[8] The Trinity is hard to comprehend, and that really is the point. We can say, “Sure, fine. God is one, and yet three. Three persons, one substance. All three eternal, not created, no one member of the Trinity eclipses the others. Fine.” But at the heart of the matter is this question: how do we relate to this mystery?

[9] To answer that, I want to get fancy just for a moment. In Christian theology, there is something called the “Doctrine of Appropriation.” Don’t worry if you forget the name, just remember what it means: When one member of the Trinity is present, so are the other members of the Trinity. This is a relief, especially when we are praying. Have you ever started, “Dear Lord Jesus...” and suddenly called him, “God”? That’s OK. Or, “Come, Holy Spirit...” and slipped into, “O Lord”? It’s all good. The essence of God is the same. The Father doesn’t jab the Son in the ribs and say, “What did Eric just pray? I wasn’t listening.”

By now, you may have a deeper understanding of the Trinity, or maybe not. But the most important question remains: why does it matter that we know about the Trinity?

[10] Firstly, while the Jews disagreed who Jesus was, we proclaim it loudly. Jesus is the Incarnate Son of God. No other religion in the world claims that God became human and walked among us. In fact, to do so in Islam, for example,

would provoke the same reaction as the Jews: believing in the Trinity is dangerous for your health. Yet, this is the foundation of our faith, that Jesus is Lord.

[11] Secondly, Jesus reminds us that he is one with God, and believing this sets us free: Free from sin. Free from death. Free to experience eternal life with the Father, Son and Spirit. We need to know about the Trinity because God is reaching out to us and inviting us to experience him. That’s the good news.

[12] Finally, the Trinity reminds us that perfect love does exist. Perfect submission, perfect relationship, perfect unity – God shows us by the very essence, the very nature of God, in whose image we were created, that we can live in love and peace with one another. That’s why the Trinity matters.

[13] The trouble in our world is too often, what is modeled before us is broken relationships. Anger, discord and disunity are far more likely to be observed than perfect love and unity. For the most part, people just don’t understand who God is, nor why that matters.

[14] We need to embrace the grace God gives us. We don’t have to fully understand the Trinity. We can be content enough to know God is. We can believe God invites us into relationship, because God is inherently relational. And knowing this, we, the church, can share that relationship with the world.

Each of us is given the choice to respond to God, to come to the Father through Jesus the Son, as the song goes. I can even share this secret with you: you don’t have to believe the doctrine of the Trinity to be a Christian! But...it really helps if you do. The Trinity can help us relate to God. We can embrace the divinity of Jesus, the proximity of God, and the electricity of the Holy Spirit. The power available to us is amazing, wonderful, and beautiful. I don’t want anyone to fully explain the Trinity to me, really. I just want to be fully overcome by the mystery of the grace of God.

Take a moment and consider your closest friend, that person often knows what you’re thinking, even what you’re about to say. Think of that person: your spouse, your best friend, your sibling, whomever it is. Just consider how that relationship developed, how it grew over time with love and conversation and mutual experienced. Remember what a blessing that person is to you.

Now consider how you relate to God, whichever image or person of the Trinity first comes to mind. Are you close in the same way? Could you become closer? I know I could.

Finally, consider someone you know who is not very close to God, but close to you. Pray for them. Invest your time with them. Find out what is important to them. And seek to connect them to the Trinity, however God encourages you.

That's why we need to know about the Trinity. With the intrinsic love God displays to us, we can reach others and draw them into loving relationships as well. Let's pray.

Memory Verse: Matthew 28:19

"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..."

Reflection Questions:

1. How has the holy Trinity been explained to you? How satisfied were you with that explanation?
2. Why is it important that some aspects of our faith remain mysterious? How does that impact how we live out our faith?
3. Why did the Jewish leaders react so harshly to Jesus' statement, "I and the Father are one"? How do you react to that truth?
4. Why is it important for us to know that God is inherently relational? How does the Trinity affect our ability to build relationships?