

# The Trinity

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] So, as Jeff said at the beginning of the service, this is Trinity Sunday. And one of the interesting things about Trinity Sunday is that it is the only church celebration, the only day that we celebrate or observe in the church that is specifically set aside to focus on a doctrine.

Most of the other things that we, the events or the special days that we set aside, we focus on certain people or certain events in the life and ministry of Jesus. But today we focus on a doctrine, which raises the question, why?

Why would you set apart a day to focus on this doctrine and not so many other doctrines, right?

Why does this get special treatment? And there's a lot of ways we could answer that.

But to put it simply, the Trinity is the doctrine behind all the other doctrines. The Trinity is the thing that makes Christianity not only unique, but uniquely able to offer the world something that no other religion or worldview or philosophy or tradition ever could.

Nothing even comes close. The entire Christian faith, the entire Christian hope, all of the reasons that the gospel is good news for the world, it all hinges on the truth of the Trinity.

[ 1 : 2 0 ] And so we're going to look at this more closely, looking at Matthew's gospel, what we just heard read, and we're going to try to ask two questions of this text as we think about the Trinity together.

First of all, what does it mean when we believe in a Trinitarian God? What does that mean? And then second, a few reasons why it matters so much. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we recognize that as we come to these questions about your nature, we stand on the precipice of a great and vast mystery.

Lord, I think of St. Augustine after writing his book on the Trinity and the story of the little boy trying to fill, take all of the water of the ocean and pour it into a little hole.

And Augustine realizing that's what he was trying to do in writing that book, trying to fit an ocean of mystery into one book. Lord, we know that we are trying to plumb the depths of something that is far beyond our ability to understand, but we pray that by your grace, you would bring us into a deeper understanding of who you are and why this matters, because we know, Lord, that you're a God who wants to make yourself known to your people.

And we pray that you would do that through your word this morning. We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. So first of all, what does it mean when we say we believe in a God who is a Trinity?

[ 2 : 5 2 ] You know, one of the challenges that you face, maybe you've had this conversation with people on your doorstep or in various other contexts, when people get confused about the Trinity and they say, well, why do Christians believe in the Trinity?

One of the things that you'll often hear is that the word Trinity never shows up in the Bible. So here we are dedicating a whole day of the church calendar to a doctrine, and that word doesn't even show up in the Bible.

So again, what is it really about? Now, the word Trinity started to be used by Christians in the centuries following Jesus and his resurrection, and they started to use this word as they tried to put language to what they had seen and heard.

So let's ask, what had they seen and heard? Well, one of the most famous passages that we look at is this passage in Matthew 28. The disciples are meeting with Jesus on a mountain after his resurrection, and Jesus gives them the great commission, which is essentially the guiding purpose of the church in the world.

He says, go and make disciples. Now, Jesus and his disciples were all Jews, okay? And what that means is that they were all monotheists.

[ 4 : 08 ] They all believe that God is one God. In fact, the most essential declaration of faith in the entire Jewish religion, and some of you may be Jewish or have come from Jewish backgrounds, the central declaration of faith in the entire Jewish religion, is the Shema, which comes from Deuteronomy 6.4.

You may know it. Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one. Right? That makes you a faithful Jew if you say that and you believe it.

The Lord is our God, the Lord is one. And this is one of the things that actually set the Israelites apart in the Old Testament. All of the other nations around them were polytheistic.

They believed in multiple gods. The Israelites were unique in that they believed that there was only one true God. So Jews, by definition, believe in one God.

And that would have been true for Jesus and the disciples, right? And yet, when Jesus gives this great commission, if you look closely at the language, he says, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

[ 5 : 26 ] In the Bible, someone's name meant their nature, their being. When you talk about the name of God, you're talking about the nature of God, the being of God, the substance of God.

And so Jesus is saying, baptize people into the identity and bring them under the authority and the personhood of God.

But the phrasing is really interesting. He doesn't say, baptizing them into the names of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. He says, baptizing them into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

And so what he's doing is he's describing God, he's representing God as a divine being with only one nature, only one name, one essence, one identity.

And yet Jesus refers to this one God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And when Jesus says, Son, he's clearly including himself alongside the Father and the Holy Spirit.

[ 6 : 30 ] And you say, well, how do we know that? Well, notice in this passage in verse 17, when the disciples first see Jesus, what do they do? They fall down and they worship him.

Now, earlier in Matthew's gospel, in this same book, Jesus had said very clearly that we are to worship God alone and no one else. Worship God alone and no one else.

In fact, in the book of Revelation, John falls down at one point when he sees an angel. He falls down to worship the angel. And the angel almost gets scared and says, no, no, no, get up, get up, get up.

And the angel says, no, no, no, don't worship me. Only worship God, right? So the Bible says very clearly, Jesus says very clearly, only worship God. Don't worship anyone else.

And yet, when the disciples fall down at his feet to worship him, he doesn't stop them. He allows them to worship him. Why? Because of his divinity.

[ 7 : 27 ] Worship God alone. Right? So even though it took years for the doctrine of the Trinity to be formalized and put to language and codified, we see glimpses of it going all the way back to the very first book of the Bible.

And when you begin to look, you begin to see little glimmers of this all throughout Scripture, going all the way back to Genesis chapter 1. When God creates the world in the first few verses of the creation story in Genesis chapter 1, it talks about God creating the heavens and the earth.

And then we see the Spirit of God hovering over the waters. And then we see that the Word of God is the means by which things come into existence.

Now, that gets picked up in John's Gospel. We'll look at that in a little while. And then when God intends to create human beings, he says, let us make man in our image.

And some people say, well, maybe this is referring to God talking to the angels. Let us make man. But if that were the case, then God would say, let us make man in my image.

[ 8 : 41 ] Because we know that human beings aren't made in the image of angels. So who's he talking about? Let us make man in our image. There's a fascinating place in Genesis chapter 18.

There's this bizarre exchange between Abraham and God. It says that the Lord appeared to Abraham. The Lord appeared to Abraham. But Abraham looks and he sees three men.

And then he runs out and he falls at the feet of these three men. And yet when he addresses this group of three men, he addresses them all as Lord. He doesn't say my Lords.

He says Lord. And all throughout the exchange, there are three men. And they're all addressed by Abraham as Lord. Right? So now, are these proof texts?

Can you point to this and say, this proves the Trinity? No. They're glimpses. They're glimmers. They're strong suggestions that the nature of God is far more complex and far more mysterious than people might have thought.

[ 9 : 47 ] They're suggestions that there is a deep mystery to God's nature that we can't fully understand or grasp. When we see Jesus come, we begin to see this much more clearly.

At Jesus' baptism, we see all three members of the Trinity present. Jesus, the Son, is baptized. And then we see the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus.

And then we hear the voice of the Father speaking over Jesus. This is my beloved Son in whom I'm well pleased. So, by the time we get to the writing down of the New Testament texts, the New Testament authors begin to acknowledge the persons of the Trinity much more directly, almost with the assumption that everybody already knows what they're talking about.

The apostle John opens his gospel by saying that Jesus is the Word, and he structures his account much like the Genesis 1 account.

That's what I was alluding to a little while ago. He opens his gospel by saying, in the beginning was the Word. And the Word he describes not only was the Word with God, but the Word is God.

[ 11 : 09 ] So, he's describing a being, a Word, and he's talking about Jesus, who is at the same time able to be with God and God. Right?

Many and yet one. And he says that this Word is the one through whom all things were made. So, when people say, well, you know, some people believe that the Word, that Jesus was created by God, at some point Jesus was created like everything else.

But if you look at the text, it says, all things were made through him. So, if you imagine two columns, okay, things that were made, all things over on this side, and then all, and there was nothing that was made that wasn't made through him.

So, if all things were made, then he couldn't have possibly been made, because then he would be in this column, right? All things were made through him. He's always been. And then by the time the apostle Paul writes down 2 Corinthians, he closes with these words.

He says, and we heard this read a moment ago, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. He just seems to assume that his readers are thinking of God in this way.

[ 12 : 23 ] So, when we talk about the Trinity, we mean that we believe in a God who is one and three persons. He is one God who is three persons.

We don't believe in three gods. That's polytheism. We don't believe in a God who is 30% or a third father, a third son, and a third Holy Spirit.

We believe in one God who is three persons who are all fully God. Now, I don't know if there's a slide up here that I'd like to put up that is a helpful way of understanding this, if you guys have that in the deck.

We have to be really careful trying to explain this, because there's a lot of bad analogies that can lead us astray, especially when trying to explain the Trinity to our kids.

So, some people say, well, the Trinity is like an egg. The Trinity is like an egg. You know, there's a shell and the white and the yolk, one and yet three. No, no, no, no. Don't ever use that analogy.

[ 13 : 26 ] Strike that from your memory, children. That's not helpful. Why? What's wrong with it? Well, the egg, shell, white, and yolk are three different substances, and we believe in a God of three persons, all who share the same substance.

So, it doesn't work. Other people will say, well, I love the image of water, because water can be a liquid or a gas or ice. That's like the Trinity. Or they'll say it's like a man who's at the same time a husband, a son, and a father, right?

No, no, no, no, no. Don't use those analogies. Those are both forms of actually a heresy called modalism that says that God in different times and places reveals himself, manifests himself in different ways.

That's not the doctrine of the Trinity. It's very hard to come up with an analogy that doesn't in some way lead us astray. That's why you don't hear many accurate analogies. One of the more accurate depictions is actually this image that you see behind me, which forces you to hold in tension the separateness and unity of the persons of the Trinity.

God is three distinct persons who coexist eternally as one. Now, how is something like this possible? A lot of people hear this and they think, well, this just sounds, I mean, I can't even get my

brain around it.

[ 14 : 46 ] And if you're hearing this and thinking, I just, I don't, I feel so confused right now. I think we're on the right track. I think we're making progress. The closer you get to the truth of the Trinity, the more elusive it feels in your brain, because it's impossible to get your brain around it.

Imagine a creature or a being that lives in four dimensions or that lives in five dimensions. And imagine trying to comprehend a being like that, right?

Imagine a creature that lives in two dimensions trying to comprehend you, right? How is such a thing possible? Dr. Nabeel Qureshi was a Muslim who used to be very opposed to Christianity when he was a follower of Islam.

And the main reason was the Trinity. He just said, how, that doesn't make any sense to me. I can't possibly fathom how that kind of thing could be possible or why anybody would believe it. And then he talks about being in a science class.

And in the science class, he begins to learn things about the natural world that we have observed to be true that begin to challenge his assumptions about what is possible. So, for instance, he learns that light can be both a wave and a particle.

[ 15 : 57 ] When we observe light, it behaves like a wave, but it also behaves like a particle. Now, how is that possible? Right? He begins to learn about things like quantum superposition, the fact that the same electron can be observed to be in two places at the same time.

It could be over here. It could be over here. Now, how is such a thing possible? And it begins to challenge his assumptions about what is possible. He begins to think, well, if light can be like a wave and a particle, if an electron can be both here and here, maybe it makes sense that the God who created all of this, including phenomena like that, could be three and one.

Maybe I'm observing things in the natural world that actually show me that this idea of the Trinity is not only unfathomably impossible, but in fact, this mystery is actually reflected in some of the aspects of the physical world that we can observe.

Now, why am I belaboring this so much? Right? Why spend so much time talking about this? And the reason is simply this, and this is the late theologian J.I.

Packer says, understanding the Trinity is central to the Christian faith. He's not saying you should take a class on the Trinity if you get a chance.

[ 17 : 21 ] He's saying it is central. Without the Trinity, there is no Christian faith, in other words. And that's why if you look at the creeds, the core affirmations of faith that define Christianity against other religions in the world, the creeds have a Trinitarian structure.

Right? The creeds are all affirmations of things we believe about God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. So the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, which is specifically focused on the doctrine of the Trinity.

They all focus on the Trinitarian nature of God. And so let me put it a little more pointedly. If you don't believe in a Trinitarian God, then with all due respect, you are in no meaningful sense a Christian.

There's no way for you to be a Christian and say, I'm a Christian, but I don't really believe in that. I don't really buy the Trinity thing. And typically, we don't compare too much with other groups.

But I think in a case like this, for purposes of disambiguation, it's really helpful to clarify what we mean. Because there are a lot of groups that people think of almost as denominations of Christianity that are, in fact, not Christian because of this reason.

[ 18 : 36 ] So, and again, all due respect. I say this with respect. No criticism meant here. But Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Oneness Pentecostal movement, Unitarians, right?

These are groups where a lot of people sort of think of them as in the Christian camp. And in various cases, there are aspects of Christianity that are in some ways reflected in these traditions. Christians, but they're in no meaningful sense Christian because they all have either a denial of or some distorted version of the idea of the Trinity.

It's very important to be clear about this. Now, what difference does this make? Why is it so important? Now, we could spend, we could do a whole series on this and never even begin to really scratch the surface.

I'm going to give you three reasons for the sake of time. Three reasons why the Trinity is of central importance. Reason number one is this. The Trinity shows us what life is all about.

[ 19 : 38 ] It shows us what life is all about. Your beliefs about God and the nature of God or the nature of the universe or the nature of how things work really shape how you live your life.

So, in the ancient world, for instance, people believed in gods who represented things like fertility and wealth and war. So, if you believe in a pantheon of gods that represent things like fertility and wealth and war, you're going to tend to believe that life is about things like sex and money and power.

You're going to begin to believe that life is about building a great family or a great tribe and amassing lots of wealth and glory for yourself and those within your ranks.

And life is about being able to dominate your enemies so that no one can touch you. Eastern religions believe in a God who is an impersonal God, meaning it's more like a force or an energy. There's no personal identity to the ultimate divine being. It's more like a force or energy. And so, those religions, not surprisingly, stress practices that help you detach, that help you in many ways depersonalize.

[ 20 : 50 ] The goal being to sort of detach from your attachments that define you specifically and to be able to merge with a kind of impersonal force, right? That's what life is about.

But if you believe in a Trinitarian God, that means that you believe that ultimate reality, the thing that life is really ultimately about, is a God who is in his very nature a relationship.

That's what you believe in. And in the first chapter of the Bible, it says that that God has created human beings in his image. And so, what this means is that life is not ultimately about sex or money or power or dominating your enemies.

Life is not ultimately about depersonalizing and merging with an oversoul or an energy of sorts.

That life is ultimately about relationships. Life is ultimately about relationship with God.

It's ultimately about relationships with your friends, with your family, with your spouse, with your kids, with your neighbors. That life is really about loving and being in relationship with others.

[ 22 : 07 ] Right? Which is something that I think we need to hear, especially in D.C. because we're so tempted to think that life is about my career. Life is about the accomplishments that I've set out to hit before time runs out.

Right? And again and again and again, people get to the end of their lives and they look back and they, and maybe there's some regret over they never climbed Everest or got that PhD or wrote that book. But the thing that most people regret is why didn't I spend more time with my friends?

Why didn't I spend more time with my kids? And now they're gone. They live on the other side of the world. Life is ultimately about relationships.

And you know, even though we all tend to forget this, I think that everybody, even if you're a stridently non-religious person, I think we all deep down know that. There's something in most people where we know the most important thing is relationships.

Why? Because that is the grain of the universe. Because the eternal principle that sits behind all existence is a relationship.

[ 23 : 18 ] And so when you prioritize relationships, you're living in line with the grain of the universe. Number two reason why the Trinity matters, because the Trinity shows us what love really means, what true love really means.

The Trinity means that God is not just loving. It's not just a character attribute. The Trinity means that God is love.

The Apostle John writes that God is love. And only a Trinitarian God could be described in this way. Only a Trinitarian God who is an eternal relationship could be described as love.

Because love requires an other, by definition. Right? And since God is love, that means that God is the source of all of the love that we see in the world.

So all love everywhere in the world. Right? The love between lovers. The love of parent and child. The love between dear friends. The love we have for siblings. All of those forms of love are like tributaries flowing out from the source of love.

[ 24 : 27 ] Which is God himself. That's the wellspring of love and why it exists in the world. So all love everywhere is one way or another a sign of God's goodness and blessing in the world.

But that doesn't mean that all love is the same. Right? At the source, at the headwaters, the water is very pure. But the further downstream you get from the source, the more pollutants and other kinds of things get mixed in.

And so there are a lot of forms of love out there that have a lot of other things mixed in as well. The only way to really know if you're dealing with pure, true love is how closely does it resemble and reflect the love of the Trinity.

See, what this means is that because God is the source of love, he's the one and the only one who gets to define love. So love is not merely subjective. True love is actually anchored in the objective reality of the Trinity.

True love is a Trinitarian love. You say, well, what does that mean? Most people think of love primarily as a feeling. Do you mean that I need to feel the way they feel in the Trinity?

[ 25 : 34 ] No, no, no, no. There's a feeling component to it. But the Trinity actually gives us a very different way to think about love. You see this in John chapter 16 and 17. Jesus is talking about the Holy Spirit in John 16 and he says, He will glorify me for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

And then in John chapter 17, Jesus is speaking to the Father and he says to the Father, Glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you. So this gives us in the very heart of God this image of three persons and yet each person is not focused on their own glory.

Each person of the Trinity is focused on the glory of the other. And we begin to see this dance that exists within the Trinity, this self-giving, other-glorifying dance of love that has played out through all eternity.

And this shows us what love really means. True love is a reflection of that self-giving, other-glorifying activity within the Trinity, where each member seeks not their own glory but the glory of the other.

So true love means seeking what is best for the other at your own expense. It means pouring yourself out to build them up. So true love is not self-seeking.

[ 27 : 01 ] It's not self-promotional. True love, in other words, is servanthood. It is serving. It is giving. It is pouring yourself out.

It is giving. It is giving. So if you have a very close friend and they say they love you and they're crazy about you and they've got your back and they support you and yet when you're really successful in your job, it threatens them.

They feel threatened by it. And so maybe they say something to kind of take away from your sense of accomplishment. That's not true love.

Right? If you have somebody who says they love you, they're crazy about you, but you notice they never put your interests ahead of their own. They always seem to kind of be making sure their interests come first.

That's not love. The way to measure the authenticity of any expression of human love is the extent to which it reflects the self-giving, other-glorifying love of the Trinity.

[ 28 : 03 ] And that means that love is anchored in the truth of God. Right? Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13 in his treatise on love, love rejoices in the truth. So love is never at odds with the truth about who God is.

We live in a culture where love and truth seem to be pitted against each other. And to love somebody often means setting all truth aside. No, no, no, no. True love rejoices in the truth because it's anchored in God. And it rejoices in the goodness of God.

Right? That's how we understand what true love is. So those are the first two reasons the Trinity shows us what life is all about. It shows us what true love really means. The third and final reason that the Trinity matters, at least that we have time for this morning, is this.

The Trinity empowers the mission of the church. It empowers the mission of the church. In Matthew 28, the great commission to go and make disciples to the nations can only be understood if we understand the Trinity.

Why would God create anything to begin with? A lot of other religions say, well, the gods created all things because they needed worshipers. They wanted worshipers and servants.

[ 29 : 06 ] That's not why. God has had everything he's ever needed for all time because of the Trinity. He has all of the love and all of the glory and all of the adoration he could ever want. He doesn't need anything.

Why would God create anything if he's perfect? And the answer is he did it because that's what love does. Because love gives.

It expands. It pours itself out. God wants a world filled with people who are able to share in the love and the joy of the Trinity.

We know from the first few chapters of the Bible and from real life experience that human beings ultimately have rejected God's love in favor of self-love.

We want to put our interests above and over God's interests. But since God is a Trinitarian God, he was able to respond to that rebellion in a way that no other God ever could have.

[ 30 : 06 ] Other gods, one-god gods who aren't three persons, would only ever be able to say, I know you screwed up, but you really got to make it better.

You really got to make it. It's on you to make it better. But they couldn't do that for you. But a Trinitarian God can. God was able to do what no other God could do. He was able to accomplish salvation for us.

He was able to be both judge and the one who endured judgment at the same time because he is a Trinitarian God. He is able to be father who created all things and desires righteousness, son who lives the life we should have lived and then dies the death that we deserve to die, taking our sin on himself on the cross, bearing the punishment for our sin.

And spirit who regenerates our hearts, makes us capable of responding in faith and crying out for mercy and then applying that mercy and then sealing us and securing us as adopted sons and daughters of God.

And then working in us the work of sanctification to make us holy and then securing for us eternal life. Only a Trinitarian God could do all of that, which means for us in response to a Trinitarian God, our role is simply to say yes to God.

[ 31 : 29 ] We just say yes. Please do that in my life. And now, as Jesus says, the same Trinitarian God is sending us out to invite others into the joy and the love of the Trinity.

We go, that's the reason we're going, to invite people into the love and the joy of the Trinity. We do this knowing that Jesus has been given all authority by his Father, and we do this knowing that through the Holy Spirit, Jesus will be with us always to the end of the age, empowering our ministry and doing things in and through us we could never do on our own.

All of that because of the Trinitarian God. Let's pray. Let's pray. Lord, this great mystery is in some ways so familiar because we hear this kind of language a lot, and yet it is also unfathomably mysterious.

And yet, as we said at the beginning, you're a God who desires to be known, that we would know your presence and know your love. And so I pray that even as we are gathered here, Lord, in all of our singing and all of our prayers and as we celebrate these sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist, Lord, that we would get a glimpse of this holy eternal dance of love.

That we would feel ourselves swept up into this Trinitarian relationship, Lord, that we would feel embraced by you, enveloped by you.

[ 32 : 59 ] We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.