

The Trinity

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[0:00] Amen. Today is Trinity Sunday. We have liturgical white on our altar today, which is a sign that this is one of the major feast days of the church.

and it just so happens that we also celebrate the 10th anniversary of the founding of this parish, Church of the Holy Trinity. It was 10 years ago this summer when a group of men in an evening Bible study decided that for the summer we would not do the Bible study, but we would have evening prayer and we'd invite the wives to join us.

And we did that. A couple other people said, hey, I hear you're doing this. Can I come too? And sure. And that was the beginning of this parish. Trinity Sunday is sort of unique in the church calendar.

Every other feast day in the church celebrates an event or a person, a saint, an event in Jesus' life. Easter celebrates the resurrection of Jesus.

Ascension, which we celebrated two weeks ago, was when Jesus ascended and went to be with his father. Pentecost, which was last week, was the coming of the Holy Spirit to the apostles, effectively the birth of the church.

[1:28] And, of course, Christmas is when Jesus was born. And so it is with every other feast day in the church, except this one. Trinity Sunday is not about any particular event.

It is about the essential nature of the God that we worship. It is a unique feast day, and it focuses on a unique concept about God.

This day in the life of the church looks not to an event, but to a theological fact about who and what God is. Now, it's sort of commonplace in liberal circles to hear people say things like, all of the great religions of the world worship the same God.

They just kind of do it in different ways. The corollary to this is that there are many, many ways to get to God, and that Christianity just happens to be our way.

They say, well, Buddhists, devotees of Islam, Zoroastrian, pagan tribes who worship kind of a nature pantheistic God, they're all focusing on the same thing, the same person.

[2:42] They're just doing it in different ways. And I've heard good and sincere Christians say that Islam and Christianity worship the same God. They just do it differently. I recall a conversation I had with a young friend of mine some years ago.

She was not a Christian at the time. She was going to have a baby soon. And I asked her if she had any thoughts concerning the spiritual education of her son who was to be born.

And she said to me that she and her husband are going to teach him about God. And I said, gee, that's great. What God are you going to teach him about?

And she knew that I was a Christian, so she didn't say anything. There was a long pause after that. She didn't answer my question. But she thought about it in a very deep and profound way.

And so that is the question that I want to pose this morning. What God are you going to teach your children about, or for that matter, yourself about?

[3:53] The point is, God is sort of a generic term, which refers to a divine being. But every faith really teaches something very different about God, something very distinctive.

The pantheistic God of Star Wars, you know, the force, as big these days. You know, that's in us all. It's in the rocks and the trees. And of course, it's in the climate. And everything that surrounds us, it pervades us. I mean, we all know what Alec Guinness said in the first Star Wars movie.

A lot of people kind of buy that as their notion of God. That's one notion of God. The God of Islam is different from the pantheistic God.

He is a distinct being. He is singular. He has no son. He does not send the Holy Spirit. He has one prophet, a guy by the name of Muhammad, who lived from about 570 A.D. to 632 A.D.

[4:58] Died, I think, on June 8th or so, just a few days ago, as they celebrated the anniversary of his death. We won't dwell on the distinctive teachings of Muhammad about this God called Allah,

but it is distinctive.

And it's very different from the God that we worship. What do we know about the God that we worship? The answer to that question is that we know absolutely nothing about him.

Apart from what he reveals to us in some way in Holy Scripture. We cannot sit down and figure out what God is all about.

Reason might tell us that there's a God because we might reason that everything we see around us was created by something or someone. Although I know of good, very smart people who say reason tells them that there's no God.

We can't reason to God, or certainly can't reason to any of his nature, apart from what we receive through revelation.

[6:15] And that revelation we get through what you just heard read a few minutes ago, those three readings, and a lot of other places in Scripture. Today's three readings, one from the book of Genesis, one from the second chapter of Paul to the Philippians, and one from the end of Matthew's Gospel, all tell us something very, very interesting about the nature of this Judeo-Christian God.

Let's look first at the Genesis reading. You know, we have new Bibles in the back, and pretty soon, they're not in the pews, but pretty soon they're going to be in every pew, so you can just crack it open and follow along.

And many of you know this Scripture that was read this morning, probably not by heart, but you've heard it a lot of times, the creation of the world.

What's this reading about? It's an account of God creating the universe. He created the heavens and the earth in the first few days, according to the account, and then creatures, and ultimately he made man.

This tells us something very important about the nature of God. He made the universe, and he is apart from the universe. He's not the universe itself.

[7:35] He's not in the universe like this Star Wars God. Contrary to the pantheistic nature of God, who has really been worshipped since the dawn of time, the God of Genesis is not nature, and he's not in nature.

He made nature. All that you see around you, nowhere is that God. The very first words of Genesis begin, In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

That's Genesis 1-1. You know it all by heart. He was around when it was created, in the very same way that a woman who cooks a meal is around and makes a meal.

But there's a difference. He made all the ingredients. She didn't make the ingredients. She took the eggs and the spices and whatnot and cooked the meal. Rather, in other words, God was there before all of those ingredients that he fashioned into his creation.

So the Star Wars pantheistic God, who is the rocks and the trees and the oceans and the climate, is very different from the God of Genesis. There's another thing in Genesis that this God tells about himself.

[8:58] It is very distinct. And it's contained in Genesis 1-26-27. You heard that, but you could pass over it very quickly and easily and not even notice unless you listen very carefully.

It goes like this. Then God said, I'm reading from verse 26, 1-26 onward. Then God said, Let us make man in our image after our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens, over the livestock and over all the earth, and every other creeping thing that creeps on the earth.

So God created man in his own image. In the image of God, he created him. Male and female, he created them. Note the plural form of God talking about himself.

He used it three times in that one verse as if to really drive home a point. Let us make man in our image after our likeness.

That's Genesis 1-26. In the English, he uses the plural pronoun us and our. If you read it in Hebrew, it's exactly the same way. He translated it right into the English, the way it came out of the Hebrew.

[10:20] The scripture does not read, and it could have read, Let me make man in my image after my likeness. It could have written that way, but it didn't. Why does this God of Genesis use a plural pronoun to refer to himself here?

Now, there are other places in the Old Testament where God says of himself that he is one.

The best example, and the one that every Jew knows very, very well, is Deuteronomy 6-4. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

Jesus in the Gospels quotes this Deuteronomy passage in Mark 12-29. So it's not just something you find in the Old Testament.

Jesus drives that point home. One God. So we have a bit of a paradox or a mystery about this Old Testament God. At the beginning, he refers to himself in the plural, and yet he insists that he is one. [11:31] What's that all about? This more than one, yet still one God, is further brought out when you look into the New Testament.

Today's Gospel reading is the very end of the Gospel of Matthew. And here's how it reads. Matthew 28, 19, and 20. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all I have commanded you, and behold, I am with you always to the end of the age.

So what is this Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that Jesus tells his disciples about after his resurrection? Well, you know, you could say that this doesn't really prove the Trinity because maybe it's just a rhetorical formula for baptism.

It's not evidence that God really has some sort of a threefold nature. So let's look at something that Jesus said about himself. I'm going to read from John 10, 30.

John 10, chapter 30. And I'll start reading at 10, 25, actually.

[13:02] And Jesus is talking to the Pharisees and the people. Jesus answered them, I told you, and you do not believe.

The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me. But you do not believe because you are not among my sheep. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.

I and the Father are one. That last sentence is kind of an odd one. This thing is loaded with stuff about who and what God is.

I can't unpack it all in this length of a sermon. But that last sentence, Jesus says two things. He somehow says that he is the same as the Father. He's got the same authority as the Father.

[14:10] And yet he speaks about the Father being apart from him, and yet it ends with, we are one. Is it two, or is it one?

There's a sense in which it's both. Clearly Jesus says one, but he refers to his Father in a separate sense. How do we figure this out? It's just like this God at the beginning of Genesis referring to himself in the plural.

And yet, then in Deuteronomy, he refers to himself as one. There are a lot of scriptures that do the same thing as this.

We don't have time to review them. But the second reading this morning from Paul's letter to the Philippians is one of those many scriptures that mentions that Jesus is God.

Philippians 2, 5-6 clearly says that in these words. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.

[15:23] And it talked about how he became a servant and emptied himself. Assuming that you clearly understand that Jesus declares himself to be God, as the scriptures say, the Father and I are one, the only way we can make sense out of this is to somehow say that God is one God, but more than one person in that God.

Put another way, the idea that God is a trinity of persons in one God flows directly and necessarily from the declaration that Jesus is God.

If Jesus is not God, you can dispense with the trinity. There's no need for it. But of course, in the New Testament, we see Jesus praying to the Father.

We'll say the Lord's Prayer in a little bit. Our Father who art in heaven. So we as Christians acknowledge God as a trinity of persons, but one God.

So what? Who cares? What does it matter? How does this affect us in the church on a day-to-day basis? Does it really affect us? Or put another way, could you say that the trinity is just some kind of dry piece of theology that is fine for seminary professors to think about, but it really doesn't affect what we do in our interaction?

[16:47] 1 John 4 is an interesting epistle. 1 John 4, 7 and 8 has some words that Jesus' closest disciple, John penned many years after his death as John was getting on in years.

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God, and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God because God is love.

Now, I've heard that an awful lot. You've heard that an awful lot. You can kind of blow past it and not think about it, but what it doesn't say is that God loves.

He is love. There is something in his essential nature that is love. God's love is not so much an action toward us as it is who and what he is.

Put another way, God does not love us as one of his actions, but he loves us as part of the essence of what he is. If I were the only person in the world, or you were the only person in the world, and there's no creation around you, you can't love.

[18:13] You can sort of love yourself, but that's kind of a, not quite the same sort of thing. That's kind of a self-focus. There's nobody to love, or nothing to love.

Love requires an object. It requires more than one person. So when John talks about God being love, loaded into that is the idea that this God is more than one person.

If that sounds too abstract, look for a moment at something that Jesus says in John's Gospel as he prays to the Father in the hours before he went to his death on the cross.

You'll find that in John 17, 24. Here, Jesus addresses his Father in a prayer to him about his disciples.

This is called the High Priestly Prayer. And he talks about himself in relation to the Father. Father, I desire that they also, he's referring to his apostles sitting there, whom you have given me may be with me where I am to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

[19:35] Note that last phrase, you loved me before the foundation of the world. What was the Father, you ever wondered what God was doing before creation?

Before he made the universe? The answer is, is that he was loving, the persons of the Trinity were loving one another.

They were in a close relationship with one another, which is the essence of what that is. The Father loved the Son and the Son loved the Father. And love requires more than one.

There must be a focus. You know, it's the same way with people. We don't love in the abstract, we love a person. A wife, or a husband, or a friend, or a child, or a parent.

Love is a word of action and it must necessarily be directed towards someone else. So, when you're wondering about what difference does it make whether our God is a Trinity or just the God of Allah, a unity, think about that.

[20:46] The essential nature of God is to love. Next Sunday is Father's Day. All of the kids will give cards to their dads and maybe a little gift.

Maybe dad will get his car washed in appreciation. I can always hope. But note that to talk about a father is meaningless and nonsensical unless there are two or more.

It takes a son or a daughter for somebody to be a father. And so when Jesus calls God his Father as he does in the Lord's Prayer, Jesus is saying that God is a relational God who is more than one. He's making a very radical statement about the nature of this God. The Jews of his day understood this very well. They wanted to stone him when he said things like that.

They ultimately took him and turned him over to Pilate and had him crucified because he said things like that. This is an appalling blasphemy to say that you are God the Son and he is God the Father, that you have this relationship with him.

[21:59] Yet in a lot of places in Scripture you see God described as one, not two gods. So we understand God as Christians, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

It's sometimes said, and I mentioned this before, that Christians and Muslims worship the same God, but they just use different terms for it. I think you can see from what we've talked about that that isn't entirely true.

But you don't have to take it from me. You'll find the same thing in the Koran. How many times does the Koran get cited from this pulpit? Probably not real often. There's a book in the Koran called the Shura, which contains a couple of verses on this very subject.

We will in a moment pray the Nicene Creed.

We say it every Sunday. And as with something that you say over and over again, you can kind of easily miss it. But note that it's broken into three pieces, three parts.

[23:30] Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Contrast that with the description that I just read to you from the Koran of what the God Allah is.

No Muslim, or Unitarian, or Mormon, or Jehovah's Witness, or any worshiper of any other God other than a Christian can say and mean the words of that creed.

Now, just a word about the Holy Spirit. I remember when I was a young boy being taught by my parents and my church about God.

I had a pretty good grip on the Father. I had a dad, and I could sort of extrapolate from the idea of my dad, my father, because I was a son.

And I was a son, so I kind of got that concept down in a sort of kind of way. And there's a lot said about Jesus. But when it came to the subject of the Holy Spirit, I was kind of pretty vague about that.

[24:35] Somehow people talked about the Trinity, and it takes three to make a Trinity, so the Holy Spirit was there kind of to round it out the third person, you know? But the third person of the Trinity was pretty fuzzy in my young mind.

And it didn't help that in those days they called the Holy Spirit the Holy Ghost. Ah, what's that mean? So, it was, I wondered about this Holy Spirit and Holy Ghost.

Is that really a person? Is that really a person or some kind of disembodied force that the other two persons kind of shoved out there and did things with us?

We're taught a great deal about the Father and the Son, but if you look at your Bible carefully, there's an awfully lot also about the Holy Spirit. And it's stuff that makes him look very person-like in a very real way.

For example, in Acts of the Apostles 13, 2-4, the Holy Spirit speaks and sends. In Acts 20, 28, the Holy Spirit chooses.

[25:48] In John 14, 26, the Holy Spirit teaches. In Isaiah 63, 14, the Holy Spirit gives.

In Acts 5, 3-9, he is lied to and he is tested. In Acts 7, 51, he can be resisted.

In Isaiah 63, 10, he is grieved. In Matthew 12, 31, he can be blasphemed.

So, these are not abstract qualities of some force. These are actions of a person. He is a counselor and an advocate, Jesus says.

Someone who counsels is not some abstract force. If you go to a counselor, you're talking to a person. If you have a legal problem, you go to an attorney and he'll talk to you.

[26:51] Maybe he'll go into court and be your advocate for you. Advocate is also used for Holy Spirit. It doesn't matter whether you're being counseled about legal matters or marriage counseling or just a friend giving you advice.

You don't get counsel or advocacy from some vague, fuzzy force or concept, but from a person. So, in being a counselor, a helper, an advocate, the Holy Spirit is very much a person.

Now, we can understand how the Trinity can be one God but three persons. Can we figure that out? You know, I can't.

And this sermon on Trinity Sunday is not going to explain how the three in one can work. Maybe there are some bishops or theologians or priests who can sort that out.

I can't do it. But the fact is that it is the case. There are two things about this Trinity that directly impact how we behave.

[28:03] First, it affects how we relate to God. The God of the Old and New Testament, unlike other gods, is a God who interacts among His persons and He made us in His image and He wants to interact with us in that same way that He interacts, the Father and the Son.

He wants us to interact with Him the way He interacts. We can call that prayer or whatever you want to call it, but He isn't a God who wants us to just do a bunch of things.

He's a God who wants us to draw Him to ourselves. Read the Psalms and David was great at this.

They say he's a man after God's own heart, it says from the Scriptures.

He screamed at God, he praised God, he begged forgiveness from God, he cried out despair against God and all kinds of other things.

But the point is he was highly interactive toward this God. God. This is the man after God's own heart. This is what God asks us to do toward Him.

[29:20] And the other part of it is we would be interactive toward one another about the things of God. You know, Holy Trinity is pretty good at that.

After church service we tend not to just waltz out of here fast. We go downstairs and we interact with one another. And that's a good thing. But not just to kind of schmooze and to be a nice social hour, but to basically interact in ways that God, you know, to encourage one another in the faith. You know, Jesus had two great commandments. Remember when He was asked by the scribe what are the two greatest commandments? Here's what He said. The most important is, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one.

I read that before. That's the one out of Deuteronomy. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this.

You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these. We love and interact with God and with man because that is God's essential nature and He wants us to share in that.

[30 : 43] Now, it doesn't matter whether your personality is that of an introvert or an extrovert. Some people think, well, that's great to say, Ray, you're kind of an extrovert and so you talk to people great.

Introverts have a tougher time with it. Actually, it might be the opposite. When introverts talk, they tend to let out more of their souls. I've known people who are incredible extroverts who talk a mile a minute and say absolutely nothing.

I got someone in my mind right now not sitting in this congregation. But God asks that we interact and connect with the souls of one another in the same way that He does.

He also wants us to be able to proclaim His faith, that faith of this Trinitarian God to other people who know nothing about it because there's an imperative.

He wants us to interact with Him. He wants us to interact with others in this church and He wants us to interact with those who are outside of the body of believers.

[31 : 58] Do this and we are truly celebrating Trinity Sunday and patterning our lives after the three persons of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

There are a lot of other topics in that that I've blown through awful fast. There are other sermons. but at least this is how we can get a grip on why the Trinity is so important to us.

Let us pray. Amen.