

SERMON TITLE: "A Divine Triangle of Love"
SERMON TEXT: John 3:1-16
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: June 3, 2018, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

This afternoon, I'm going to a special worship service at Trinity Presbyterian Church, northeast of Harrison and 2nd Street. The purpose of the special service is the ordination of their associate minister, Catherine Tobey. United Methodist clergy are ordained at annual conferences, like the one we're going to have here in Ogden later this week. That's great for involving lots of United Methodists from all over the conference. But Presbyterian clergy are ordained in the local church where they are serving, which allows more people from their local community to be there for the big occasion.

It's appropriate that I'm going to *Trinity* Presbyterian today because the Trinity is what I want to speak with you about today. The reason so many churches, like our own Trinity United Methodist Church in Salt Lake City, have that word in their name is because the doctrine of the Trinity is important to us as Christians. Our Trinitarian beliefs were worked out at major council meetings in the early centuries of the church, and this doctrine is reinforced by our creeds and hymns. The traditional Christian calendar also names a Sunday after Pentecost as Trinity Sunday—and thus encourages us to devote some time and thought to this mysterious and difficult-to-understand nature of God.

To help us contemplate this abstract subject, we have on the bulletin cover a triangle-circle symbol* which is sometimes used to depict the Trinity. Other times, you will see three interlocking circles, a trinity knot, or just a simple triangle. St. Patrick used the three-leaf clover to explain the doctrine of the Trinity to the Irish. What all those symbols have in common is that they show three parts or aspects of one thing. No symbol will ever perfectly describe such a holy mystery. But, this morning—with the help of John chapter three—I want to propose to you that the Trinity is like a divine triangle of love.

1—GOD THE FATHER/CREATOR

The verses we read from John three are fairly familiar. We know the story of Nicodemus going to Jesus by night and being told by Jesus that he must be born from above, or born again. And most of us could probably recite the King James version of John 3:16—“For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

As dear as that passage of scripture is to us, however, I doubt many of us have ever thought of it as speaking about the Trinity. That’s because there’s no mention of the word *Trinity* there. In fact, the word *Trinity* never appears in the Bible. But, in a small number of passages, we do find a naming of all three persons of the Trinity. And that’s the case in these verses. While Nicodemus and Jesus are talking, they refer to the presence of *God* and the kingdom of *God*. Then Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born of the *Spirit*. Finally, Jesus explains that God so loved the world that he gave his only *Son*, so that the world might be saved through him.

While the name “God” can refer to all aspects of the Trinity, the name “God” is often used to refer to God the Father, or God the Creator. God is also described in the Bible with words like *rock*, *shelter*, *mighty fortress*, *judge*, and *mother bear*. This eternal, unchanging, ever-present, and all-powerful God is the original being from whom all else has come. This person of the Godhead is usually associated with the creation story, where God brought life out of the watery chaos and declared creation to be good.

When we read what Jesus said about being born of water and the Spirit, we think of this Creator God. We think how God brought each of us to life out of a watery sac in our mothers’ wombs and declared our birth to be good. Our experience of God’s kingdom and our salvation as God’s children begins with our recognition of God’s great love which brought us into creation. Like a proud parent, beaming with joy at the birth of a child, God the Father/Creator makes up the first side of the divine triangle of love.

2—GOD THE SON/SAVIOR

The Triune God didn't stop with creation, however. Ever since the time of Adam and Eve, we humans have managed to find our way into sin. Consequently, God has needed to manifest a variety of skills, remedies, and even personalities. Because God loved the world so much, our Creator didn't want to leave us to our own faulty devices. Therefore, God came to us in the form of a divine Son—God incarnate, in human flesh. This son Jesus lived in such a way as to reveal to us what our lives could be like if we would choose to believe in God's love. Jesus was able to carry out his assignment because he was one with the Father—divine, even as the Father was divine.

This unity of God the Father and God the Son is what makes Christianity unique from other religions. The Jewish and Muslim faiths accept that Jesus was a great teacher and prophet. But they don't believe that Jesus could have been divine, because they believe that there is only one God, the Creator. In their strict monotheism, there just isn't room for a divine Son of God. On the other end of the spectrum are the polytheistic faiths which declare that there are many gods who function in many different ways. For example, the ancient Greek and Roman religions had gods of the sun, moon, stars, and sea; and they had gods of love, hate, and war. Each of those gods had its own characteristics and functions.

In between and in contrast to all those other religions, Christianity asserts that the Father and the Son, the Creator and the Redeemer, are different aspects of the one same God. Just as the Creator was involved in redeeming the world through Christ, so was the Son and Savior Jesus present and active at the creation of the world.

Just as one triangle has multiple sides, so the triune God has more than one facet and reality. But all the angles or personalities are unified by the love which caused God to send his only begotten Son, so that the world might be saved. When we believe in Jesus and seek forgiveness of sin and eternal life, we receive the benefits, not just of the Son, but of the entire divine triangle of love.

3—GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT

And that, of course, leads us to the Holy Spirit, who is the divine spirit of both God and Jesus, of both the Father and Son, of both Creator and Savior. Because we know the Holy Spirit came with mighty power on the Day of Pentecost, we might think that the Holy Spirit wasn't around until after Jesus ascended to heaven and sent the Spirit to be with his disciples. We might think that the Holy Spirit wasn't active until that day in which the Spirit came with wind, flames, and foreign languages. But Genesis tells us that God's wind-breath-spirit was involved in creation, and the Spirit of God was made known to God's people throughout the Old Testament times bringing wisdom, comfort, and courage.

In today's New Testament lesson from the Gospel of John, Jesus spoke to Nicodemus about a real and present Spirit who could remake, reshape, and renew his life. Jesus taught Nicodemus that his human flesh—which had grown old and had developed bad habits—could be reborn from above, by the power and direction of the Holy Spirit. Again, we see the love of the Trinity at work. To begin with, God the Creator gave Nicodemus life. Then God the Son came to live on earth where the teacher Jesus could interact with Nicodemus and stir him to belief. And now, God the Holy Spirit was able to blow a fresh breath of life into a man who had been growing older and more stuck in his ways every day.

Who says an old dog can't learn new tricks? When the divine triangle of love is on our side, anything is possible.

CONCLUSION

Other than confirmation and membership classes, we don't usually talk much about the Trinity. I suppose that's because it *is* hard to understand. The very heated philosophical debates about the nature of God, Christ, and Spirit that went on during the early centuries of the church go right over our heads today. Words like *substantia* and *personae*, *hypostaseis* and *homoousion* are just Latin and Greek to us. Because the mystery of the Trinity is difficult to understand, we may dismiss it as boring or irrelevant. Maybe we'd rather talk about the controversies of our day than the *homoousion* controversy

which threatened to split the church in the fourth century. Nevertheless, I think it's good for us to take some time to ponder the Trinity once in a while. And by so doing, we may find that the doctrine has something to do with our lives today.

The Trinity isn't just an abstract philosophical mystery. The Trinity is God offering us salvation at every opportunity possible and in every way possible. At every angle and on every side, in a diversity of ways, the Triune God is reaching out to us and demonstrating love for God's diverse creatures. From the goodness of the original creation to the divine revelation in Jesus' human flesh to the transforming possibilities and power of Spirit rebirth, the Trinity is affirming, forgiving, and reviving us. "For God so loved the world that" God came to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to fill us with love for ourselves and our various brothers and sisters in this world. And that's a symbol we need today. That's a doctrine we can appreciate. That's a divine triangle of love.

