

SERMON TITLE: "The Personalities of God"  
SERMON TEXT: Matthew 28:16-20  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: June 4, 2023, at First United Methodist Church

## **INTRODUCTION**

According to the church calendar, the Sunday after Pentecost is known as Trinity Sunday. So today is the day of the year that we're supposed to think about the mysterious nature of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, one in three and three in one. Most of the time, we just take the Trinity for granted as a foundational Christian belief. We sing it in our hymns and recite it in our creeds without giving the doctrine much thought. But if we bring this undergirding principle up out of the basement once in a while and wrestle with it a little bit, maybe it will be more meaningful to us. So, today, we'll begin by trying to answer the question, "What is the Trinity?" Then we'll move on to the question, "How does the Trinity relate to us?" In other words, how do we understand and connect with the personalities of God?

## **1—WHAT IS THE TRINITY?**

A definition of the Trinity requires some background information. So, let me take you back in history to the fourth-century General Councils at Nicaea and Constantinople. There, in what is present-day Turkey, the church leaders debated and voted on all kinds of issues and beliefs. Specifically, they were trying to come to a common understanding of how Jesus and the Holy Spirit related to God, the eternal and divine creator. Those leaders of the church wanted to find a way to explain how God could be pre-existent and undefiled, and also involved in the lives of finite, earthy human beings and other aspects of the world. How could an eternal God enter into time and space to create and redeem it?

By the end of the fourth century, those major church councils had hammered out the idea that God is "one substance and three persons," most commonly known as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. By declaring that God is one in substance, essence, and being—and yet three in

persons—this traditional understanding tried to hold together the mystery of how God can be pure, holy, and transcendent, and also interact with a world where sin, death, and decay are ever present.

Part of the reason why it took four centuries to settle on a doctrine of the Trinity is that the Bible is rather quiet on this subject. It may surprise you to hear that nowhere does the Bible ever use the word *Trinity*. In fact, there are few scriptures that even come close to using what we would call the trinitarian formula. Our Gospel reading today from Matthew 28 is the only place in the Bible which uses all three of the terms *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit* in one verse. Second Corinthians 13:13 contains an alternate three terms in one verse. There, the Apostle Paul signed off his letter with the benediction: “The grace of the *Lord Jesus Christ*, the love of *God*, and the communion of the *Holy Spirit* be with you all.” While each of those individual aspects or personalities of the Trinity are found many, many times in the Bible; and while two of the three persons of the godhead are often found together; they aren’t all three usually grouped together in a tidy package that makes it easy to describe God as a Trinity. Beyond Matthew 28:19 and 2 Corinthians 13:13, the scriptures are lacking in easily quotable references to God’s triune nature.

Another reason it took several centuries of theological debate to develop the traditional doctrine of the Trinity is the diversity of names for God in the Bible. Although the individual descriptors of *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit* each appear frequently, they certainly aren’t the only ones. For just a sampling of what I mean, listen to the words of a song in our hymnal. Each of these descriptors comes from the Bible. Here’s the first verse that describes God the Father:

Source and Sovereign, Rock and Cloud, Fortress, Fountain, Shelter, Light,  
Judge, Defender, Mercy, Might, Life whose life all life endowed.

And here’s the second verse that describes Jesus the Son:

Word and Wisdom, Root and Vine, Shepherd, Savior, Servant, Lamb,  
Well and Water, Bread and Wine, Way who leads us to I AM.

Then the third verse describes the Holy Spirit:

Storm and Stillness, Breath and Dove, Thunder, Tempest, Whirlwind, Fire,  
Comfort, Counselor, Presence, Love, Energies that never tire.\*

Of course, the Bible contains even more descriptions of the Trinity than these. In an old youth confirmation curriculum, there was a lesson that consisted of looking up Bible verses which depict God with such words as *Almighty, Lord, Deliverer* and *Redeemer* and which compare God and Jesus the Christ to creatures like a mother bear and a hen with chicks. Likewise, the Book of Proverbs describes the Holy Spirit as the wise woman *Sophia*.

It's interesting how Genesis chapter one lays the foundation for this diverse understanding of Trinity. There, in the creation story, God uses plural words to say, "Let **us** make humankind in **our** image, according to **our** likeness" (1:26). Even though the standard Jewish understanding of God was clearly monotheistic, the ancient Hebrews obviously believed that God couldn't be pigeon-holed in one idea. Whatever any human being could imagine God to be, God would be much, much more than that. The threesome-ness of the Trinity doesn't limit God to three ideas either. The Trinity symbolically reminds us that within the unity and oneness of the divine, there are multiple expressions and personalities of God.

## **2—HOW TRINITY RELATES TO US**

Speaking of personalities, that leads me into the second half of this sermon: How the Trinity relates to us with our various human personalities and identities. If God were only one thing and nothing else, then it would stand to reason that we who are created in God's image would all be exactly alike. For example, if God were only male, then only males would be created in God's image. Or if God were only right-handed, then only right-handed people would be made in God's image.

Sure, that sounds ridiculous to us now, but it wasn't that long ago that the right-handed majority tried to force lefties to use their right hands. And there are still places and institutions where men are perceived to be much closer to God than women. That seems crazy, right? But even when, on one level, we know it can't be true, we still behave in so many ways like we believe it is. The trick is for us to

understand and affirm the multiplicity that is contained within the divinity of God. Because our one God holds a diversity within God's own self, we who are made in God's image have a lot of variety in shape, size, color, ability, gender, language, culture, religion, sexual orientation, interests, health, brain function, and more. Those differences aren't moral aberrations. They are manifestations of the divine image.

I'm not saying that we should accept everything as good. Just because God created us and called it good doesn't mean that anything goes. Attitudes of hatred and abuse are wrong. Behaviors that hurt others are evil. God's love should always be the norm and guide. We need to realize that within the Divine Trinity, there is a range of variability that is a lot wider than we have typically been willing to admit.

Decades ago, I learned of the Myers-Briggs personality test, that classifies people into one of 16 different types. I figured out that I am an ESTJ. That means I'm an extrovert, who gains information from my senses, and makes decisions based on logical thinking. Another person might be an INFP, an introvert, who perceives situations based on intuition and feelings. An ENTJ would be an extrovert who thrives on learning new ideas and seeking justice.

A pastoral counselor friend of mine once gave me a list of prayers based on the Myers Briggs personality types. For each of the 16 types, there was a prayer that fit that kind of person. For example, if your type is INTJ, your prayer is "Lord, keep me open to other's ideas, WRONG though they may be!" If your type is ESFJ, your prayer is, "LORD, GIVE ME PATIENCE, AND I MEAN RIGHT NOW!"

It seems to me that one of the great teachings of the doctrine of the Trinity is that our God of many personalities can relate to each one of us, no matter how we identify or what kind of personality we have. The diverse God who made us in the good and divine image of variety also knows our particular weaknesses and trouble zones. Our one-in-three and three-in-one God has a big tool chest with lots of remedies and helps. If we need strength and stability, God the Father is there for us. If we

need forgiveness and mercy, God's Son is ready to redeem. If we need energy and guidance, God's Spirit is blowing with fire and inspiration.

And that's comforting to us human beings, right? We wouldn't want a small God who was limited in capacity. We want a God who is more than we are. And, since we're not all the same, it's great to realize that God isn't all the same either. When we affirm that we believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, we are affirming that the one God who made us and called us good can relate to us in a multitude of ways.

### **CONCLUSION**

Maybe one of the best ways to understand the personalities of God is to think about our many human relationships and identities. For example, I am just one person, but I am a mother, a daughter, a sister, a wife, a niece, a cousin, and a sister-in-law. Then we could add to those facts that I am a pastor, that I like to bake cookies, and that I am a learner of the Spanish language. I am a native Montanan and have lived in Utah for a decade; but, in between, I lived in Colorado for 26 years, and I'm definitely rooting for the Denver Nuggets in the NBA playoffs. I am one person, but I have many perspectives.

I know you could describe yourself in a variety of ways too. We all can. So it makes sense to us that we can think of our one amazing God as even more diverse than we are. The doctrine of the Trinity reminds us that God isn't just one thing. There are many personalities of God.