

An Invitation to Love God

Matthew 28:16-20

June 14, 2009

I.

During the sixth day of creation God said, "Let us make man in our image" (Gen. 1:26). And, of course the term "man" was not limited to the male gender but included all humanity. But here's the point. God said let "us" create people in "our" image." And this was not a use of the so-called royal pronoun, which was unknown in the Bible or literature of biblical times.

So, who is "us?" And who is "our?" The answer is on the cover of our service bulletins. Today we celebrate Trinity Sunday, one week late because I was away last Sunday. This is an important day because we contemplate the doctrine of God, and venture into the mystery of who God is and what God does. And we see how God, as the eternal undivided Trinity; as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, invites us here on earth to share the love that unites them as one in heaven.

And as part of this process we will have to think outside the box. We will have to abandon our earthly rules of physics that say two things cannot occupy the same space at the same time. In fact, we will find that time and space do not limit God. And the term "person" will have a very unconventional meaning.

This can be a complicated doctrine, both for preachers and for congregations. I'm reminded of the fellow who went to church once a year. It wasn't Christmas or Easter, but Trinity Sunday. He said he really enjoyed seeing the preacher get so confused trying to explain the Trinity.

Hopefully that won't happen today. I'm not going try to define God because it cannot be done. Instead I want to focus briefly on how we experience God in our lives, and then explore more deeply how we are invited to participate in God's life.

A starting point is the Catechism of the Church at page 852 of the Prayer Book. It proclaims one God existing in three persons, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. After this sermon is over we will say the Nicene Creed, which has three parts, one each for the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In today's Gospel the risen Jesus sent the disciples out to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And the point is that these three persons exist as one God. They are not three gods, and not just one person wearing three different hats. The math is a little tricky. You don't go higher than three. But one plus one plus one still equals one.

II.

It's helpful to understand the Trinity in the two ways. One is to imagine what the Trinity *is*. The other is to recognize what the Trinity *does*. In the first situation we can think of the Trinity that exists "out there," beyond time and space as we understand it. This is the Trinity that always has existed, even before creation when there was no universe. We think of this aspect of the Trinity as God in heaven. It is what the Trinity is.

The second way to look at the Trinity is to recognize how God is present "down here," with us right now, within our time and space and history, active and involved in our lives. We think of this aspect of the Trinity as God in the world. It is what the Trinity does.

And they are the same. The Trinity that exists out there beyond time and space is the same Trinity that acts down here with us right now. However, we perceive them in different ways.

When we think of what God does in the world, we can experience the joy and comfort of knowing how God loves us. The Gospels proclaim that love, and it is the basis of our salvation.

But when we contemplate what God is in heaven, we can experience the wonder and beauty that results when we love God. The first of the Great Commandments tells us this, and it is the basis of creation and our very existence.

And you have heard many sermons about how God the Holy Trinity loves us. I'm not going to elaborate on that today. Instead I ask us to reflect on how we are called to love God. That's why we celebrate Trinity Sunday. That's why, at least once each year, we try to grasp the mystery of what the Trinity is. And so let's take a deep breath here and jump in.

III.

We can begin with the reality that God in three persons existed before creation. God has been around from all eternity past, and will be around for all eternity future. There never was a beginning. There is no end. Those concepts of time and space do not even apply to God.

Then we encounter the concept of a person. We think of persons as separate individuals with separate bodies and centers of consciousness. Each person is unique. If there are three people in a room, there are three separate people in the room. They don't also exist together as one person.

It's different, however, with God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who are three separate and distinct, but yet completely united, forms of existence. All three share the same single essence and being as one Godhead, even though they also are three separate divine beings. Now, our laws of physics say three objects cannot occupy the same space at the same time. But we already know that the Trinity exists outside of time and space, and so we have to think differently.

It also might help to consider what the Trinity is not. Is there a hierarchy in the Trinity? Is the Father like the rector, the Son like the assistant rector, and the Holy Spirit like the parish administrator? No, they all are co-equal. Even though they relate to our faith and worship in different ways "down here," no one of the three has any priority over the other "out there."

We also can ask where the Son and Holy Spirit came from; did the Father exist first, then the Son, and then the Holy Spirit? Again, the answer is no.

Just as the Father always has existed, so has the Son and Holy Spirit. They all are coeternal. This might be counterintuitive, but there are two reasons. First, if the Son and Holy Spirit were created beings then they could not be God because God cannot be created. Second, created beings can change or be changed, and we believe that God does not change. God in three persons always has been God in three persons, and did not evolve into three persons from one person.

Finally, two other errors should be avoided. One is that the Trinity is not a single being who just wears three different hats to play three different roles. This idea was rejected very early in the church's history.

On the other hand, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not three Gods. Christians of the New Testament and Jews of the Old Testament always believed in one God. The coming of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit two thousand years ago was not the revelation of two more gods, but rather two more aspects of the same God who spoke to Abraham and Moses.

And sometimes we draw analogies. Some say that the Trinity is like water in its three separate states; liquid, steam, and ice. That, however, misses the point if we rely on our understanding of the laws of nature. A bucket of water here in Diamondhead is either water, liquid, or solid, but it's not all three at the same time.

God, however, is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, all at the same time, even though they are separate divine persons. If we used the analogy of water to describe God, we would have to say that the Trinity is like all water everywhere eternally existing simultaneously as entirely liquid, entirely steam, and entirely ice. That kind of thinking can make my head hurt.

But, in any event, when we eliminate what the Trinity is not, we can more easily perceive what remains. And even then, the nature of God still is surrounded by mystery. Some things, however, are known, and we can summarize our understanding of the Trinity existing "out there" beyond us as having three essential attributes.

First, there is one God, consisting of three separate, and fully and equally divine persons, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who also exist as one being.

Second, these persons are coeternal, and have existed throughout eternity past. They have no beginning as we understand that idea, and none of the three was created by the other. This means, for example, that Jesus Christ, the earthly Son of God, became incarnate from the eternal heavenly Son that always has existed.

Third, and this is the most complex, as these separate beings share one essence as one God, they envelop, surround, and are merged with each other. In the limited terms of our own vocabularies, they share the same molecules. They mutually indwell each other and are bound together by reciprocal love and communion with each other.

And this is not romantic love or mere brotherly love, but a concept of intertwined, self-sacrificing, unconditional, all-giving spiritual union that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have for each other that binds them in eternal unity. I know this sounds a little metaphysical, but it is consistent with what God through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit have revealed to us.

IV.

But what does this mean for us today? Why is it important to understand what the Trinity is, out there? Why not just focus on what the Trinity does, down here, and simply recognize that God the Father is made known to us through Jesus Christ as mediated by the Holy Spirit?

Well, certainly our faith places Christ at the center of our prayers and worship down here. But there is one more aspect as well. It goes to the essence of God out there, and that essence is the mutual love they share as I have struggled to describe it, a love so great that from it creation and the universe emerged. From it and because of it, we came into being down here. We can imagine that the love they share spilled over and on the sixth day of creation we were blessed with life.

This is what we mean when we say God is love. Certainly God loves us, which explains what the Trinity does. We learned that in Sunday School. But God also exists as love; a love that is essential to what God the Trinity is.

And we are invited to be a part of the love that penetrates their being. We are asked to know the love that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have for each other in their own existence. We are given the opportunity to love God as the first Great Commandment calls us to do. And we do not create it from within. Instead, through prayer, worship, and concern for others, we give ourselves to the essence of what they share in eternity. That is what loving God means.

And when we allow that to happen, God's heavenly unity will lead us to fulfill God's purpose of earthly unity as the model for Christian living. We truly can love God with all of our being, we can love our neighbors as ourselves, and our lives will be enriched. *Amen.*