

**Loving God**  
Matthew 28:16-20  
May 30, 2010

**I.**

We are in the middle of celebrating our heritage of freedom, aren't we? There was a stirring service in Diamondhead yesterday, and tomorrow officially is Memorial Day.

We continue to remember those who died in military service that we might live in freedom. All across America flags fly, bands play, and parades pass in review to honor the brave men and women who gave their lives in service to our country.

Our Eucharist today, which always is devoted to the glory and presence of our Lord, also will be observed with special intention for the memory of these brave Americans.

Today's Gospel leads us to celebrate another day, which is a holy day in the church. Today also is Trinity Sunday, and in our reading we heard Jesus give the disciples what we call the Great Commission. He told them go out and teach, and baptize, and to make disciples of all nations.

And I want to focus on how Jesus told the disciples to baptize. He said to do so in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These three divine persons, who exist together as one God, are the main attraction today. And so this calls us to consider nothing less than the Doctrine of God, the source of our common life in the Church and the foundation of our faith.

This can be a complicated doctrine for you and for me. I'm reminded of a fellow who went to church once a year. It wasn't Christmas or Easter, but Trinity Sunday. He said he enjoyed seeing the preacher get confused trying to explain the Trinity. Hopefully that won't happen today.

**II.**

This means I'm not going try to define God because it cannot be done. Some things simply are mysteries. Other things, however, are known, and from them we can draw additional conclusions.

And so, within those guidelines I would ask us to focus on two ways of understanding the Holy Trinity. The first relates to our participation in God's life, and the second involves God's participation in our lives. One asks us to imagine what the Trinity *is*, and the other calls us to recognize what the Trinity *does*. That distinction might help organize our thoughts.

When we consider what the Trinity is, it usually is in the context of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, "out there," beyond time and space. This is the Trinity that always has existed, even before the universe was created. We think of this aspect of the Trinity as God in heaven.

The other approach is to recognize what God does, "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 being present in the world.

And they are one and the same Trinity. God out there beyond time and space is the same God down here with us now, but with different aspects. And those two aspects reveal the two sides of love. One shows how we can love God. The other shows how God loves us.

When we reach out to God in heaven, we open ourselves to the joy of loving God. This is the first of the two Great Commandments, and is the basis of our lives as Christians.

But when we are a part of what God does, here in the world, we experience the peace of knowing that God loves us. The Gospels proclaim that love, and it is the basis of our salvation as believers.

And so, here's the big picture. Imagining what the Trinity *is* makes us think of God out there in heaven, beyond time and space. This is the God we are called to love. But experiencing what the Trinity *does* reveals God to us down here in the world. This is where God loves us.

You frequently have heard about how God loves us in the world. Today, however, I ask us to reflect on our call to love God in heaven. It's why we celebrate Trinity Sunday. It's why once each year we seek the mystery and meaning of the Trinity. So let's take a deep breath and jump in.

And we will think outside the box. The term "person" will have an unconventional meaning. We will ignore earthly rules of physics that say two things cannot occupy the same space at the same time. We will disregard boundaries of time and space that limit us but do not affect God. And there will be a new math. We will see that one plus one plus one still equals one.

### **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 do not apply to God. God in three persons always has been God in three persons.

This leads us to consider the concept of a person. We think of persons as separate people with individual 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 exist together as one person.

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, however, are three separate, but yet completely united, forms of existence. All three comprise the same single essence, 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 also know the Trinity exists outside of time and space. Our laws don't apply.

It also might help to consider three questions with answers that show us what the Trinity is not. This can eliminate confusing errors.

First, is there a hierarchy in the Trinity? Is the Father in charge, with the Son and Holy Spirit as assistants? 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." They are equal in what they are, even though different in what they do.

Second, is the Trinity one being who wears three different hats? Does God act sometimes as the Father, sometimes as the Son, and sometimes as the Holy Spirit? Again, the answer is "no." God does not change. The Father always is the Father, the Son always is the Son, and the Holy Spirit always is the Holy Spirit.

This addresses the third question. Can we treat the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three Gods? Once again the answer is "no." 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. The error in that is that while a bucket of water can be any of those three states, the same water cannot be 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.

And so, before moving on, let's try to summarize what we have so far. 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 always have existed. They have no beginning as we understand that idea, and none was created by the other. This means that Jesus Christ, the earthly Son of God, became incarnate from the eternal heavenly Son that always has existed.

Third, these three beings share one essence. They envelop, surround, and are merged with each other. In our limited vocabularies, they share the same molecules even though they are distinct.

And fourth, they mutually indwell each other and are bound together by reciprocal love and communion with each other. This shared love is an essential ingredient of what the trinity is.

#### **IV.**

Now, you might ask, "Is any of this in the Bible?" The foundations of the doctrine are indeed in the Bible. The Old Testament revealed God in the plural. In the Book of Genesis God said "Let *us* make people in *our* image." (1:26). And the Lord said to the prophet Isaiah "Whom shall I send, and who will go for *us*?" (6:8). There are additional examples. And these were not uses of the so-called royal pronoun, a product of Elizabethan English unknown in biblical times.

References to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit also appear throughout Scripture, and sometimes in a single passage or sentence. In today's Gospel Jesus told the disciples to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (28:19). Again, there are other examples.

With this background, it was left to the early Church Fathers to interpret Scripture and formulate the doctrine of the coeternal and undivided Trinity of three persons in one being as it now exists. That work was complete during the fifth century, and is accepted throughout Christendom.

#### **V.**

But what does this mean 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 Jesus and the Holy Spirit are the center of worship down here. But I mentioned earlier another aspect of God out there. It is the mutual love that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share with each other, 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 might 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 that penetrates and defines their trinitarian being.

And we are invited to be a part of that love and share the love the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have for each other in their own existence. It is an opportunity to love God as we are called 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.*