

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Trinity Sunday marks the end of the festival half of the church year and the beginning of the Sundays after Pentecost, the long stretch of green Sundays that carries us right through to late November. The festival half of the church year takes us through the drama of God's mission in the world in Jesus Christ, from his birth through his crucifixion, ascension, and the sending of the Holy Spirit. Today we place ourselves liturgically before all the glory and splendor of the Triune God, encompassing the creation, redemption, and sanctification of the world. Today we pause, in awe, in wonder, and in gratitude, giving thanks for all that has been accomplished by Jesus' earthly ministry, and anticipating the next chapter, the mission of the church to connect people of every time and place with that saving reality. A proper focus on the Trinity today prepares us for the closer look at our part in carrying out God's ongoing mission in the world.

Many of you have heard me complain before about hearing sermons in which the Trinity is treated as a mystery that we can't understand, but just have to believe. My own father, a Lutheran pastor and high school religion teacher who was ordained the day I was baptized 63 years ago had his own complaint about Trinity Sunday, but his was that all of the other festivals of the church celebrated something in the life of Jesus, whereas Trinity Sunday celebrates a doctrine. But he was reacting to his own history with conflict in the church in which doctrine was used as a weapon. In my previous congregation down in Carbondale, he would often fill in for me when I had to be out of town, and he somehow got stuck with Trinity Sunday on quite a few occasions, which I felt a little bad about. My response to both approaches is this: from a Lutheran perspective, Christian doctrine has only one function, and that is to undergird and facilitate the proclamation of the gospel. So, what the doctrine of the Trinity is meant to be is Good News, the good news that God by God's very nature is inclined toward us, creating, shaping, and preserving us in relational interactions, both with God and with one another.

The understanding of God as Trinity does not appear fully formed anywhere in the Bible, although our three readings today have some hints in that direction. From Matthew we infer that in the earliest church baptism was done using a trinitarian formula, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. The closing of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians also uses a trinitarian greeting, one that you will recognize as the opening greeting we use every Sunday: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you." But what about the Genesis reading? Surely there's no trinitarian formula there? Well, the early church saw one, actually. At the Creation of the world, God's spirit moved over the primordial waters, and then God created the world by speaking. And that speaking, that word of God, the Apostle John would later go on to insist, was God's son Jesus. So already in just the first three verses of Genesis, Christians have seen the Trinity at work.

I want to talk about three ways that the Trinity is indeed good news for us, focusing on each person of the Trinity in turn. And I want you to notice how these ways say something more than our default conceptions of God give us. What do I mean by that? I mean that we humans seem to be hardwired with a religious instinct that points us to a "higher power," someone who is stronger, wiser, and better than we are. Greek philosophy ran with this instinct and pushed it to its logical conclusion, conceiving of God as almighty, omniscient, and omnipresent, and influencing the writers of the New Testament, as well as theologians and hymnwriters down

through the ages. The God revealed in the life of Jesus and the doctrine of the Trinity does not negate this emphasis, but it gives us much more than that.

First, the Trinity proclaims a God who is self-giving. The Trinity goes beyond understanding God as merely the author of creation. It gives us a God who in creating also gives Godself to us. God as Trinity from eternity only makes sense if God intended all along to step outside of Godself on behalf of God's beloved creation. The doctrine of the Trinity tells us that this is built into who God is, that God is defined by love, as John alludes to in his Gospel and says directly in his letters. God is love, fully invested in the created world. And truly to love is to give oneself to another.

Second, the Trinity proclaims a God who is dependent. This implication of the Trinity is even more surprising and counterintuitive, because we are used to thinking of God as the one we and all creation depend *upon*, which of course is also true. It's what we are saying when we confess "God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth." But then we immediately pivot and confess Jesus, as "God from God, light from light, true God from true God." That is dependence, and we have just confessed our way into a paradox. This image of God as Son, as dependent on another for existence even apart from the incarnation, has caused offense from the very beginning of the Christian movement, and that offense continues right down to the present day. Throughout his earthly life, Jesus manifested this dependent relationship by his radical orientation toward God the Father and reliance upon him for everything. And in the face of death, he trusted the Father's will to make his death a pathway to life for himself and the whole creation. So, in the Trinity we have God revealed as both the one who is depended upon for everything and one who depends upon another for everything. And to be joined to Christ in baptism, as Paul says in Romans, is to be drawn into this divine relationship. Jesus' dependence on God becomes our dependence on God.

Third, the Trinity reveals God's ongoing faithfulness to us and all creation. God has not merely wound the clock – set the universe in motion – and walked away. Nor has God simply come for a visit in Jesus and then gone back home, leaving us to our own devices. The Trinity reveals to us God as Holy Spirit, who actively and continually connects us by faith to the crucified, risen, and ascended God the Son, particularly in the gifts Word and Sacrament. And through these means of grace God is at work to free us from our captivity to sin, death, and evil, and make us the conduits and agents of God's self-giving love for the world.

In short, then: the Trinity is not meant to be some inscrutable, arcane bit of religious trivia that we are asked to affirm. It is not meant to be the fine print terms and conditions we sign onto when joining the Church, a mystery that we can say no more about than that it is a mystery. The doctrine of the Trinity is meant to be rather an encapsulation and summary of the glorious Good News of God's love for the world in Jesus Christ. But it is also more than a summary. It declares to us a promise of God fully invested in us as God's good creation, fully willing and able to see us through from the beginning of the world right through to the end, through chaos, through sin, through evil, and through death, to finally enfold us in God's eternal, loving embrace.

May that mysterious, paradoxical, and wonderful Good News grab our hearts and imaginations this Trinity Sunday. May it animate and orient our lives, both individually and as a community. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep us connected to Christ Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit, for genuine and abundant life now and in the age to come. Amen.