

Romans 5:1-5

1 Corinthians 12:4-6; 2 Corinthians 13:13

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What Matters Most: The Trinity

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

THE LANGUAGE OF RELATIONSHIP

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

At the end of Bible study on Wednesday morning, I told the group I had a special request of them. “Please pray for me,” I said, “that I won’t give an academic lecture on the Trinity when I preach on Sunday morning.” Then I added, “And please pray for yourselves, that you won’t hear an academic lecture on the Trinity when I preach on Sunday morning.”

When we consider “what matters most” for our Christian faith and Christian lives, the idea of the Triune God — “God in three persons, blessed Trinity” — is the foundational belief. And yet, this most basic and most important belief about God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit is incredibly challenging for our human minds to grasp.

Last Sunday, I mentioned Rev. Ernie Thompson, minister at the First Presbyterian Church in Wilmington. In his presentation on church history and Reformed theology to new elders and deacons, Ernie tells how he majored in Physics at the University of South Carolina. “In physics,” he says, “you work toward the goal of finding the answer. It may be difficult to get there, but that’s the goal, to find the answer.” He tells how it was an adjustment to go to seminary and study with professors who would say, “I can teach you so much about this subject, but after that, it’s a mystery.”

St. Augustine, bishop of Hippo in North Africa, was one of the greatest Christian theologians. He spent thirty years working on a book which he called “On the Trinity.” Augustine tried to develop an intelligent explanation of “one God, three persons.”

There is a story about Augustine walking by the seashore one day, contemplating and trying to understand the mystery of the Holy Trinity. He saw a small boy running back and forth from the water to a spot on the seashore. The boy was using a sea shell to carry the water from the ocean and place it into a small hole in the sand.

The Bishop of Hippo approached him and asked, “My boy, what are doing?”

“I am trying to bring all the sea into this hole,” the boy replied with a sweet smile.

“But that is impossible, my dear child, the hole cannot contain all that water,” said Augustine.

The boy paused in his work, stood up, looked into Augustine’s eyes, and replied, “It is no more impossible than what you are trying to do – comprehend the immensity of the mystery of the Holy Trinity with your small intelligence.”

Augustine was absorbed by such a keen response from that child, and turned his eyes from him for a short while. When he glanced down to ask him something else, the boy had vanished.

Some say that the boy was an angel sent by God to teach Augustine a lesson on pride in learning. Others affirm it was the Christ Child himself who appeared to Augustine to remind him of the limits of human understanding before the great mysteries of our faith.¹

After thirty years and fifteen volumes about the Trinity, St. Augustine ended his great work with a prayer, in which he said, “*We speak much, and yet come short; and in sum of words, He is all.*’ When, therefore, we shall have come to You, these very many things that we speak, and yet come short, will cease; and You, as One, wilt remain ‘*all in all.*’ And we shall say one thing without end, in praising You in One, ourselves also made one in You. O Lord the one God, God the Trinity, whatever I have said in these books that is of Yours, may they acknowledge who are Yours; if anything of my own, may it be pardoned both by You and by those who are Yours. Amen.”

Yes, this most basic and most important belief about God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit is incredibly challenging for our human minds to grasp. The language of logic only gets us so far in our understanding of God the three in One. But what about the language of relationship? Perhaps that language can speak to our hearts and, in turn, to our Christian lives, because, as St. Augustine himself said about our relationship with God, “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless, until they can find rest in you.”

In her essay about the Trinity in her book, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, Kathleen Norris writes about the relationship between art and science to get at the mystery of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. She quotes Albert Einstein, who wrote about “wonder, questioning, and contemplation”: “If we trace out what we behold and experience through the language of logic, we are doing science; if we show it in forms whose interrelationships are not accessible to our conscious thought but are instinctively recognized as meaningful, we are doing art. Common to both is the devotion to something beyond the personal, removed from the arbitrary.”

“Instinctively recognized as meaningful” —

that’s what I mean by “the language of relationship.”

Let’s put aside the analogies and philosophical attempts to explain “God in three persons” and listen to our hearts.

What stirs in your heart when a baby is baptized in our worship service? The parents make their vows and claim the promises of the faith on behalf of their child. You, the congregation, make your vows and promise to teach the child the faith, so he or she will one day make a public profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Then I scoop up some water from the baptismal bowl and put it on the child’s head and say, “Child of the covenant, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” When we baptize a baby — or an older youth or an adult — all of us are asked to remember and renew our own baptismal vows. And when we remember

and renew our own baptismal vows, we are committing ourselves once again to the relationship we have with God through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, and to the relationships we have with one another as the body of Christ.

What stirs in your heart when you hear Jesus' command to his disciples on the mountain in Galilee? "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20)

Combine Jesus' marching orders for his followers with the words of the apostle Paul, and you get a good picture of the dynamic relationship that flows from God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to all of us as followers of Jesus Christ and members of the body, his church. Paul writes, "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone." (1 Corinthians 12:4-6) Let me add the next verse, which I didn't read earlier this morning: "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." The one triune God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — works in and through our relationships and our community of faith, and calls us again and again to renewed and committed relationships with one another.

What stirs in your heart when you hear the benediction each Sunday morning? "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you." (2 Corinthians 13:13)

Each Sunday, I stand before you with outstretched arms and offer that benediction. From time to time, I will say something in addition, such as, "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord" or "Arise, people of God! Shine! The light of our Christ is in you and among you, guiding you and blessing you, now and always." But I always end with blessing of the Trinity, because in those words we hear the summary of the Gospel, the entire story of God's claim on his people and our lives from the beginning until now. We are saved by God's grace in Jesus Christ and put back into a good and right relationship with God who loves us and calls us to be his people. We are called into the communion of saints, the body of Christ, the fellowship of believers. We are called to a life of praise and service, to the glory of God, in the name of Jesus Christ, empowered by God's Holy Spirit.

A few years back, our General Assembly issued a study about "reclaiming the Trinity" in the life and mission of the church. The paper is called "The Trinity: God's Love Overflowing." Here is part of what it says:

In sovereign love God created the heavens and the earth and called and formed the people of Israel to be a light to all the nations. In costly grace the Lord Jesus Christ ministered among us and was crucified and raised for us and for our salvation. In transforming power the Holy Spirit renews and sanctifies us, draws us into new communion with God and each other, awakens our praise and worship, and equips us

for the service of God in the world. The Triune God does all this through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit. About this the church must have no doubt: The doctrine of the Trinity proclaims to us the very heart of God, made known to us and to the world in the self-sacrificial love of Jesus Christ and poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.”

Several years ago, a friend gave me a book called *The Five Love Languages*. The book is about communication between spouses and was written by Gary Chapman, who has been a marriage counselor for more than thirty years. In a nutshell, Chapman says married couples express their love in different ways — what he calls “love languages” — and spouses need to understand, respect, and accept that about one another.

In his opening chapter, Chapman makes a comment that could be applied to the “language of relationship” as we think about what it means to worship and serve “the one triune God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” Chapman writes, “We must be willing to learn our spouse’s primary love language if we are to be effective communicators of love.”

If we paraphrase that statement just a bit, we might start to get a better understanding of the significance of “God in three persons” for our Christian lives and our Christian service: “We must be willing to learn God’s primary love language of relationship if we are to be effective communicators of God’s love.”

It hardly seems coincidental that the first and greatest commandment is to love God with everything we have and are, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, God has spoken his very heart to us about how to be God’s people.

Are we willing to learn God’s primary love language of relationship, in order to be better at sharing the love of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, God in three persons, blessed Trinity?

Let us pray: Almighty and everlasting God, you have given us grace by the confession of a true faith to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity, and by your divine power to worship you as one: we humbly pray that you would keep us steadfast in this faith and defend us from all adversities; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

NOTES

¹ Marian Horvat, “Augustine and the Seashell,” at www.traditioninaction.org/religious/h065r-p.Shell.html