

"TRINITY AS GOOD NEWS"

Psalm 8; 2 Corinthians 13:11-13

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Introduction to 2 Corinthians 13:11-13: For Trinity Sunday, we're reading these couple of verses from the very end of Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth – the "sign off" in the form of a benediction or blessing.

We're familiar with a Trinitarian form of blessing – invoking the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and often we hear it at the end of a church service. Many of us may have a vague idea about this practice coming from the Apostle Paul and his way of concluding a letter to a church. In fact, this is the only letter in which he refers to all three Persons of the Trinity in his sign-off blessing.

This is an adaptation that comes from various translations and research on the Greek text:

"Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Be restored to wholeness. Be encouraged. Set your minds on the same purpose. Live in peace with one another. And the God of love and peace with be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the people of God greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you."

Trinity Sunday is the only special day in our church year devoted to a doctrine. Perhaps that should indicate that the church over the years has found this strange thing we say about God important enough to spend time pondering. But as soon as you start pondering, you run into difficulties. What does "one God in three Persons" mean, exactly? Isn't it a contradiction? Is there a way to explain it that makes sense? A metaphor that will give us that "aha" moment of clarity? Unfortunately, when you start in on the explaining, more often than not, you find yourself saying things like "The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are each a part of God," or "At times God is the Creator and at times God is Jesus, and other times God is the Spirit," or some similar thing to which the church has said, emphatically and repeatedly, "no, that is definitely wrong."

New Testament professor Greg Carey says "every time I'm asked a Trinity-related question, I sense I'm standing on the heresy cliff, the ground crumbling under me." (p. 22) I get that. But for some reason I kind of like to stand on that cliff anyhow. I find the doctrine of the Trinity endlessly compelling and deeply meaningful.

I know there are plenty of folks who wonder if this doctrine, or any doctrine, really, has any resonance or relevance for the church today. Does it make any sense for us to keep it? Does it matter? I believe that it does. In fact, I think the doctrine of the Trinity provides us with a spiritual grounding for living the life of faith in our broken world.

Sometimes it's treated as an irrational, contradictory dogma that exists only as a kind of faith test: can you somehow force yourself to believe this unbelievable thing to prove that you really have faith? That's not what this is for. The point of any doctrine is to teach us, to invite us to think about big things, and to help us shape faithful lives. How we see God is important because that has a tremendous impact on how we see the world, and one another, and our calling as people of faith.

But how to talk about something so abstract and strange?

I've usually thought about this way of seeing and speaking about God as an invitation into two separate truths about God.

The first is that God is Mystery – beyond the limits of our understanding, our words, our categories, our images. God reveals God's self to us in an immensity of love, holiness, beauty, and creative power, but is not fully available to our scrutiny, not answerable to us. The doctrine of the Trinity invites us to walk around in, explore, to dwell inside the mystery of God.

The second is that God's very nature is Relationship. This means that we, who are made "in the image of God," as Genesis tells us, are also made for relationship, connection, and community.

Mystery and Relationship.

But now I'm thinking that those are not after all two separate ideas about God, but part of the same idea. Relationship is part of the mystery. To affirm the Trinity is to acknowledge "the relationality at the heart of the divine Mystery. (Carey, p.22)

The Trinity does not provide a complete and unabridged biography of God. It doesn't unpack the exact way the Creator, the Christ, and the Spirit relate to one another, or define precisely when and how each acts in the world.

You may have noticed that, in his blessing to the Corinthians, Paul "makes no attempt to sort out the relations between God's love, Christ's grace, and the Holy Spirit's fellowship." (Cooper, p. 43) The creeds of the church don't, either. What they do is simply tell a story.

The doctrine of the Trinity affirms the whole of the gospel story:

God created a world and called a people,
Blessed and healed in Jesus,
and empowers the church through the Holy Spirit.

And the seemingly separate pieces of this story are actually a whole. One story. One God. The same God.

This is the one and the same story that we are privileged to be part of.

And that's a mystery in and of itself. In fact, that's the mystery Psalm 8 is all about. When we read that Psalm, we marvel along with the psalmist that "the creator of a spectacular cosmos" would also care about "relating intimately to humankind." (Carey, p. 22)

"What are human beings that you are mindful of them?" the Psalmist says to God.

Indeed. I hear that, and I wonder, too. Why on earth would God want to be bothered with us? We look around us, and it's really hard sometimes to see why God doesn't throw in the towel. I would.

But I'm not God. And I guess that's the whole point.

I can't understand the mystery of God's apparently unshakeable intention to maintain relationship with us. I really find it hard to see the potential God seems to see in us human beings – when I see how we keep doing the same stupid stuff over and over, close our ears to truth, refuse to repent of the sin of racism, cling to an unsustainable way of life, prioritize "the economy" over everything including human lives.

But *God* sees us as capable of beauty and honor, of relationships that are just and compassionate, of responsible care for the earth and its creatures, of wise leadership and faithful service, of community and creativity, of true worship, of being a blessing in the world.

If any of that is true, or could be true, it can only be because this is what God has always envisioned for us, which is more or less what it means that we are made in the image of God, isn't it? And maybe that image of God might yet be uncovered and made to flourish in us.

Professor Carey writes that "the key to proclaiming the Trinity ... is to remember that it is good news." (p.22) And the only news that is really good news, really worth telling, is news that means something in our lives. Not necessarily news that makes us happy, but news that we need.

This is where the doctrine of the Trinity gets really relevant – maybe too relevant for some of us. But I believe it is relevant for us *right now*, in this time.

The God who is One but more-than-one, in whose image we are made is calling us to be people who look beyond our individuality to community, who are as concerned about our responsibilities as our rights, who see that every person's death is tragic, who understand that we are not free until we are all free.

The same God who put words about justice into the mouth of the prophet Amos, and touched sick people with Jesus' caring hands, and gave courage to the Christian living in the violent "peace" of the Roman empire is the same God who is still calling us to live not only relational, connected lives, but whole lives.

God is One, and we who are in God's image don't live one life *inside* that mystery and another apart from it. The same God who is teaching us how to be church in a pandemic is prompting us to say that black lives matter and to go to protests. The same God who is meeting us in prayer is giving strength to those who are doing hard and necessary and sacrificial work in these days. The same God who helps us say "I was wrong" and "I forgive you," also calls us to get serious about addressing the climate crisis. The same God who wants to transform our hearts directs us to transform our society.

Those aren't different kinds of things. They emerge from faith that claims One God, who is the God of everyone and everything. There is no line that separates the "sacred" from the "secular," there is no topic that "doesn't belong" in the church's conversation, no place where truth doesn't matter, no group of people we are allowed to designate as undeserving of God's love, no endeavor in which we don't need to ask both about the human impact and whether or not God would be pleased.

Our congregation's intention statement begins with the words "we live a whole life." I never thought about it this way before, but that affirmation is rooted in the doctrine of the Trinity, which invites us to find our wholeness, our connection, our unity of purpose, our understanding of who we are within the mystery of God.

I want to close by reading those words Paul wrote again, this time from *The Message*. It's worth remembering that Paul wrote them to a church struggling with division and conflict, sown by leaders who promoted both bad theology and their own egos. Paul's closing words to wrap up his appeal for wholeness, unity, and shared purpose point those believers – and us – to what we now call the doctrine of the Trinity:

"And that's about it, friends. Be cheerful. Keep things in good repair. Keep your spirits up. Think in harmony. Be agreeable. Do all that, and the God of love and peace will be with you for sure. Greet one another with a holy embrace. All the brothers and sisters here say hello. The amazing grace of the Master, Jesus Christ, the extravagant love of God, the intimate friendship of the Holy Spirit, be with all of you."

Amen.

Resources:

Greg Carey, "Living By the Word: June 7, Trinity Sunday" in *The Christian Century*, June 3, 2020

Articles by Stephen A. Cooper and Jana Childers in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, volume 3*

Eugene Peterson, *The Message*