

“How Big Is God’s Love?”  
May 30, 2021  
Scripture: Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17

Possibly the most difficult to understand and hard to explain concept in our faith is the idea of Trinity. Most of us can say what Trinity is: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But what does it mean? Why do we think about God that way? Literally, hundreds of volumes of theology have been written over the centuries in attempts to make Trinity clearer. Fights in the Church over how to understand Trinity have led to hostility and even schism. It’s ironic, but predictably human, that a concept intended to help us understand God’s love has generated hatred and violence instead.

With all that baggage, you’d think the Church would just toss Trinity out and stop talking about it. Instead, we double down on it and have designated a Sunday in its honor. The Sunday after Pentecost is Trinity Sunday. It’s the only day dedicated to a doctrine and not an event, like Christmas or Easter or Pentecost. Part of the reason for that is Trinity is unavoidable; even those three holidays – Christmas, Easter, Pentecost – sort of point to Trinity. We can think of them as Birth, Redemption, Empowerment; Father, Son, Holy Spirit.

Trinity is all around us. We only need to find ways of expressing it. Part of the reason for our confusion is the inadequacy of our language, as one 4<sup>th</sup> century bishop wrote, “we are forced to raise our lowly words to subjects which cannot be described.” (Hilary of Poitiers, *The Trinity* 2.2) Trinity is an attempt to describe the depth and breadth of God’s love. Too often we get hung up on the formula to be used. For some, the only valid way to describe Trinity is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But many of us have found that formula no longer speaks to the depth of our experience. It feels limiting.

A few years ago our denomination passed a document on Trinity titled *The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing* [[\God'sLoveOverflowingtheTrinity.pdf](#)], that looks at what we believe and how we can more fully articulate our understanding of Trinity. It makes clear that the quality of God emphasized in Trinity is communion. God exists in relationship. The three persons of Trinity exist in a sort of divine eternal dance to form the Godhead. There is no hierarchy, or independent spheres of activity. All three are present in all things in a mutual indwelling, what Church tradition calls *perichoresis*, an “everlasting and interactive divine communion [in which] each lives with, in and for the others.” (*The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing*, p. 10)

But I don’t mean to be too academic about this because Trinity was never meant to be a cerebral exercise. Trinity is a spiritual experience. We encounter God as Father, Son, and Spirit. Part of the trouble we have thinking about it is rooted in those masculine names we use. But God as Father isn’t intended to mean God is male. It was the best way available to express the deep intimacy we share with God; Jesus talked about God as father. But the word he uses, the same as Paul, is “Abba.” Abba is Aramaic for “Daddy.” It’s a term of endearment not authority. The

point is we are intimately related to God and not God's subjects or possessions. Referring to God as Mother makes just as much sense. It's not done as often in the Bible, but it occurs from time to time, as John Calvin pointed out when he wrote in his commentary on Isaiah: "God 'did not satisfy himself with proposing the example of a father, but in order to express very strong affection chose to be likened to a mother and calls the people of Israel not merely children but the fruit of the womb.'"(*The Trinity: God's Love Overflowing*, p. 8) God gives birth to Israel, just as God gives new birth to those who put their trust in Christ.

Experiencing God with that deep intimacy is why the Church cannot ignore or simply dismiss Trinity as a way of thinking about God. But it makes sense to use other ways of expressing it. Some suggestions to help us think more broadly about it are: (The following examples are taken from *The Trinity: God's Love Overflowing*, pp. 8-9) God as the One from Whom, the One through Whom, and the One in Whom we offer our praise; in terms derived from the Noah story in Genesis, we can think of God as our Rainbow of Promise, our Ark of Salvation, and our Dove of Peace; in the context of hearing and proclaiming scripture, we might think of God as Speaker, Word, and Breath; in relation to baptism God could be Overflowing Font, Living Water, and Flowing River; as people born anew God is Compassionate Mother, Beloved Child, and Life-giving Womb. All of these and more can be found in the church's report on Trinity. They all provide a way of thinking about God with images that are internally related and emphasize either a personal or functional bias.

The purpose of all of this is to help us focus our thinking about God to bring us into a deeper relationship. We are created for relationships of love; relationships that begin with God's love for us revealed in Christ, God's only begotten, who lived, died and rose to point us to the path of salvation, the path that leads to life that's whole and lasting. The love we experience in God is so deep and broad it can't be reduced to a single term. Trinity is the Church's way of talking about how big God's love is.

And when we become open to God's love at work in our lives, we live in new ways. It's as if we're reborn and we see the world and our place in it with fresh eyes. Paul says we put to death the deeds of the body, that is, we no longer live only for ourselves but for Christ who is our spiritual brother; as God's children we become joint heirs with Christ. But that new status is revealed through our willing desire to enter Christ's suffering, to love the world as God loves.

So, again, Trinity isn't just about orthodoxy, having the right belief; it's about orthopraxy, having right actions in the world. When we live in ways that honor God's love in our lives, we live for the world God loves. And our actions in the world are shaped by Christ's actions; "we suffer with him," as Paul says. Life lived enfolded in Trinity is life that finds meaning through serving others. That's why we celebrate Trinity and hold fast to what it teaches; in its wisdom we discover a love that sets us free to be born again and become God's children of peace.

Amen