

“What is the Big Deal About the Trinity?”

Liturgical Date: Holy Trinity (B)

Primary Text: 2 John 3, 7-11 (not assigned Epistle for the day), references to many other Trinity passages

Grace be with you, mercy, and peace, from God the Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love (2 John 3). Today’s sermon for Holy Trinity Sunday draws from our Epistle text from 2 John as well as numerous other Bible passages. The title of the sermon ask the question, “What is the Big Deal About the Trinity?”

The doctrine of the Trinity has been the subject of much confusion and controversy over the years. The first few centuries of Christian history, as we will see, featured much wrangling over the issue and even today many deny this key tenant of the faith. The Church has wisely seen fit to set a day on the church calendar to celebrate the Trinity. In fact, do you know what the most common name Lutheran churches is? You guessed it. Trinity. In fact, according to one website (data was from 2011) “Trinity Lutheran Church” cracks the top 10 for church names for all churches in the whole country, with the obvious most common being “First Baptist Church.” In the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, well over 500 of our churches have “Trinity” in their name. And with about 6,000 congregations this means about 1 in 12 of our congregations is a “Trinity.” In fact in our Circuit alone there are two “Trinity Lutheran Churches” (Athens and Toccoa).

Years ago I was manning an information table that Trinity had set up at the J&J Flea Market as an outreach. A man approached the table and asked what the name of our church was all about. I answered that it means

that we confess that that there is only one true God, in three persons. He said, “Did you know that the Trinity is not in the Bible?” I quickly realized that the man was trying to bait me into an argument. We had some dialogue and he left me with a business card for his church and he took some information from me as well. So what of his of question? Is the Trinity in the Bible, or this belief just created by the early church? It IS true that the word “Trinity” does not appear in the Scriptures. However, it is also true that the doctrine of the Trinity IS in the Bible.

The doctrine that there is only one God is central to the Bible and what we believe, teach, and confess. Deuteronomy 6:4, known as the Shema, is a very dear verse to Jews and Christians alike and it states, “*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord.*” The teaching that there is only one God is strongly emphasized in the Old Testament from the Books of Moses (including the 1st commandment), Psalms and Proverbs, and the prophets. In fact, this belief in one God (monotheism) is what set apart the people of Israel from their pagan neighbors. What of the New Testament? Yes, it is emphatically taught there as well. Jesus Himself made this clear in many cases, including in St. Mark 12:29 when he quotes the Shema. The early church believed this as well, evidenced by St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 8:4-6, “...we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one...But to us there is but one God”. There clearly is only one true God.

On the other hand, we also have verses that put God in a plural context. In the very first book and chapter of the Bible, Genesis 1:26, “*And God said, Let us make man in our own image.*” In our Old Testament lesson for today from Isaiah 6, verse 8 says, “*And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”*”

How is this harmonized? The Trinity is the answer. There is only one God, but in three distinct persons. As we confessed moments ago in the Athanasian Creed, *“But the Godhead of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is one: the glory coequal, the majesty coeternal.”* Unfortunately, many throughout history have failed to grasp this truth. I want to touch briefly on two heresies that attempted to distort the truth of the Triune God.

The first one I talked about in a sermon not too long ago. Arius was a pastor who lived from about 250-336 AD in Alexandria, Egypt. Arius is one of the most infamous and arguably most damaging heretics of all time. He began teaching what became known as Arianism. He taught that Jesus was not of the same substance or essence as God the Father. Arius said that there was a time when Jesus was not God, that He assumed divinity at a later point, and thus not equal to the Father (subordinationism). Arius gained a following, but the church through the leadership of Athanasius and others were able to refute this heresy. The Athanasian Creed, was not actually written by Athanasius as it emerged in the sixth century in Gaul (France), but it reflects the teachings of Athanasius and the church fathers who stood for the true doctrine of the Trinity. Verses 27-35 of the Creed are a specific refutation of Arianism. The church councils at Nicea in 325 and Constantinople in 381 refuted Arianism and gave us what we confess today as the Nicene Creed.

Even before Arius, there was another heretical teacher named Sabellius of Rome who lived in the third century. He taught what is commonly known today as modalism. Modalism says that there is only one God, but not in three distinct persons. God only appears in different manifestations, or modes, at different times. Tertullian and others stood against him and refuted this error.

Now we could spend a lot of time on the history and ins and outs of these controversies and how they were addressed, but that is another sermon in itself. What about our question that we are considering today, “What is the big deal about the Trinity?” I mean if these people said they believed in Jesus, then what’s the big deal? Wasn’t the early church splitting hairs on points that don’t really matter in the big picture of things? NO!!!

Let me give you an illustration of this point. What if everyone who knew Ronald McDonald would receive free Big Macs for life? Back in 2014 a rival fast food chain was introducing a breakfast menu. Their ad campaign opened with a man, who looked nothing like the famous clown, saying, “Hi, I’m Ronald McDonald and I love (rival restaurants) AM crunch wrapper.” Then another man also named Ronald McDonald and so on until there is a whole group of Ronald McDonald’s. Do you get the free Big Macs for knowing any of these people? No. Why not? Because their names may be Ronald McDonald, but they are not the real one that you need to know to get the benefit.

So this is the key point. If someone says they worship God, or even that they follow Jesus but they don’t know the God of the Bible then they don’t really know God. If you have the wrong God, then you don’t have Jesus, and if you don’t know the real Jesus then you don’t have forgiveness of sins, and if you don’t have forgiveness of sins then you don’t have eternal life. You instead have a counterfeit God and this only leads to damnation. Jesus Himself links knowledge of the true God to knowing Him, especially in the Gospel of John. In our Epistle for today from 2 John, this is emphasized. It calls someone who does not confess Jesus Christ correctly as an “antichrist” and urges the early church to not welcome these people into fellowship. This is why the Athanasian Creed is so adamant about the issue

and says in verse 26, *“Therefore whoever desires to be saved must think thus about the Trinity.”*

But is this a little harsh over a doctrine that some may say is not clearly taught in the Scripture? I would submit to you, in agreement with all the orthodox teachers of the Word throughout the centuries, that the Trinity IS clearly taught in the Scriptures. Some of the references are not as obvious to a superficial reading. However, Trinitarian theology is seen in both the Old and New Testaments. God is often mention in a three-fold formula such as in the benediction that we use from Numbers 6:24-26 and the threefold use of “Holy” in Isaiah. The New Testament contains many passages where the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all mentioned in the same areas (our Gospel from John 3 and Peter’s sermon on Pentecost for example). In seminary we read an entire book on the Trinity in just one book, the Gospel of John. While some of these references may not be apparent to the untrained eye, there are also some very clear references to the Trinity in Scripture as well.

Arianism is dangerous because if Jesus was not fully God, then how could he be the perfect sacrifice for the sin of the world as only God is perfect? John identifies the Word as Jesus. Verse 1 of his Gospel states, *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”* In Genesis we know the Word was there with the Father at creation. Jesus is coequal and coeternal.

Matthew 28:19 tells us, *“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.”* All there members of the Trinity are here in one verse. If they are not all three persons of the one God, then why we would make disciples and baptize in the name of something that is not God? 1 John 5:7-8 states,

“For these are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word (Jesus), and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness on earth, the spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one.” Paul speaks of all three members of the Trinity in his benediction in 2 Corinthians 13:14.

But what of modalism? Could the appearances of Jesus and the Holy Spirit just be this one God manifesting Himself differently at different times? No. In St. Matthew 3 at Jesus’ baptism we see all three persons of the Trinity present at one time. Jesus is in the river being baptized, the voice of the Father says, “this is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased”, and the Spirit descends like a dove. John says in 1:32 that he saw the spirit descend on Jesus as a dove as well. If God just appears at different times in different manifestations rather than persons, how could this happen? Furthermore, when Jesus ascended into heaven, whom was He ascending to if God was only before them in Jesus? Who was Jesus praying to in the Garden of Gethsemane if the God was only present in the flesh in that time and place? These heresies are not only historical footnotes as well. Contemporary movements like the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Mormons, and the Oneness Pentecostals all teach forms of these false teachings.

So can we fully understand the Trinity? Can we fully understand as fallen human beings how God can be one, and at the same time three persons? No. I like how some theologians have said that the Trinity is an “evident mystery”. We know that it is true from the testimony of God’s Word. The Bible clearly says that there is only one God, and that He exists in three persons. Are there illustrations and symbols that can help us understand it? Yes, but not fully. The Trinity is similar to other mysteries that we cannot fully explain like the real presence of Christ’s body and blood

in Communion and how He desires that all will be saved, but all will not be. But as with these doctrines, we confess the Trinity to be true because we know God cannot lie and He tells us the truth in His Holy Word.

So is the Trinity a big deal? Yes, a very big deal indeed. We must know the one true God. The one true God is the Triune God revealed to us in the Bible. Each member of the Trinity has distinct roles. However, they all have one goal: the salvation of mankind by grace through faith. By the death of Jesus Christ on the cross the sacrifice was made for our sins. Jesus, sent by the Father, and His gift of eternal life brought to us by the Holy Spirit working through Word and Sacrament. The three persons of the Trinity are indeed the one true God who bring us back into right relationship with God.

I am going to let Martin Luther have the last word today in this quote from a Sermon that he preached in 1538, *“We should stay with the true, ancient belief that there are three distinct persons-Father, Son, and Holy Ghost-in the eternal Godhead. This is the most sublime and the first article of Christian faith. I may not say that there are three gods as there are three men or three angels. Rather I must say that there is only eternal God. To be sure, a threeness does exist in the Godhead, but this threeness exists in the Persons of the one Godhead. Not three Gods, not three Lords, not three Creators, but one God, one Lord, one Creator, ...One divine Essence and yet three distinct persons-Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.”*

Amen.