

The Trinity

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[0 : 0 0] So today I'm going to be continuing our sermon series entitled A More Beautiful Gospel. And this sermon series has been about some of the most commonly held beliefs within the Christian church. We've been defining those beliefs, but also talking about how those beliefs play a particular role in the way that we exist as a community. And today I am going to be talking about one of the most distinctive beliefs within the Christian church, which is the idea of the Trinity. Now, understanding the Trinity can seem like an intellectual exercise sometimes.

It's a way to kind of like rationalize it, to kind of figure out like, what does this mean? Like, how do I wrap my mind around this very strange concept? But what I want to do today is explain why the Trinity is so absolutely beautiful. The idea of the Trinity has transformed and healed parts of me that I did not even know needed healing. For most of my life, I have felt alone. It's not really anything that anybody has ever said or done that makes me feel this way.

It's a combination of a lot of different factors, but it's added up to this kind of like low static hum of loneliness as I go through my life. I tend to hover on the outskirts of community, but it's hard for me to really feel like I'm a part of it, like I belong. I've learned to adapt, to kind of like lose myself in the rhythms of my life. And I justify it by saying like, oh, I'm shy, I'm introverted. And I've learned to make friends with that part of myself. But there's also been this other part of me that longs for deeper and more meaningful connection, for community, for family, for people to call my own, for people who would call me their own. And sometimes that seems a little bit too far out of reach. The irony is that I know that I am not alone in this feeling. I begin my sermon with this because I know that there are many of you sitting here today or watching online or watching later that know exactly what I am talking about. We have all felt alone at various points in our lives because loneliness has become an epidemic in this country. Cigna recently came out with a recent poll, kind of like after the worst parts of the pandemic. And they found that over half of all

Americans, 58 percent, are considered lonely. And there are so many reasons for why we are so lonely. Some of us may have simply always struggled with these feelings. For others of us, we first experienced profound loneliness during the pandemic, when we literally showed our care for our neighbor by not being with them. And we see more of each other now due to the rise of social media. But all of those forms of online connection often lead to us feeling more lonely and disconnected and not less. When we consider our role in the grand scheme of things, we can feel so lonely and insignificant. Sometimes the universe seems like a very lonely place to be. The Trinity matters because it helps us to see a way out of this loneliness. The threefold nature of the Trinity gives us a clue that at the heart of the universe, the foundation of it all, there is mutual self-giving love and not loneliness, not isolation.

My hope is that this sermon will explain how that can possibly be true. And I also want us to view the sermon as an invitation to mystery. I will include some definitions of this sermon, but I know that I'm only going to be scratching the surface of what the Trinity is. One of my favorite explorations of the Trinity is Richard Rohr's book, Divine Dance, which I highly recommend you looking up and reading after.

[4 : 05] But he begins with this quote, Remember, mystery isn't something that you cannot understand. It is something that you can endlessly understand. When we are faced with a mystery, we can choose to turn our backs on it and embrace certainty. But when it comes to our faith, mystery is where we encounter God time and time again.

Mystery encourages us to leave the shore behind and dive into the deep end. The Trinity is a mystery, but that doesn't mean we can't try to understand it. Instead, we can endlessly understand it. So in honor of the Trinity, I'm going to be dividing my sermon into three parts and asking and then answering three questions. The first question I'm going to ask is, what is the Trinity? And then second, I'm going to ask, what does the Trinity reveal about God?

And then finally, I'm going to touch on the question, why should the Trinity matter to us? So let's start with that question. Why? What is the Trinity?

To define the Trinity, the Trinity is the uniquely Christian idea that God is both three and one. One God, in essence, consisting of three distinct members or persons.

Now, I want to break this idea down a little bit further because there's a lot of like church jargon in that very small definition. So one God, in essence, means that Christians join other monotheistic religions, Judaism and Islam, in affirming the existence of one God. This is a personal God, meaning that we are called to have a relationship with this God. This is in contrast to the early Greco-Roman culture in which Christianity got its start, where they believed in a pantheon of different gods. Christians believe in one. However, Christians have historically affirmed the existence of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And each member is distinct from one another, and yet they are each God. However, they are not separate gods. You don't have one God that's a Father, one God that's the Son, and one God that's the Holy Spirit. Instead, together they are God. And this poses a bit of a paradox.

[6 : 30] It forces us to ask, how can God be both three and one? How can we affirm the oneness of God, and then affirm that God consists of three distinct members? When we ask these questions, we are asking the same questions that the early church did. They somehow started believing in this idea of a Trinitarian God. I do want to say that the doctrine of the Trinity, as we understand it today, did take a bit of time to develop. There were councils that kind of like tried to figure out and parse out the language surrounding this. But the Trinity does have its basis in the earliest scriptures in the New Testament. For example, in Matthew 28, verse 19, Jesus commands his disciples, 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. So in this commandment, we see that framework. And this is in the context of one of the central Christian practices, which is baptism. And they will kind of place on an equal playing field.

So verses like these later help the church recognize the equal authority and the equal divinity of each member of the Trinity. The Apostle Paul also adopted this Trinitarian framework. In 2 Corinthians 13, verse 14, Paul gives this benediction to the Corinthian church. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you. Today, most scholars agree that Paul's letters were written before the Gospels. So they represent some of the earliest Christian understandings of their faith. It is likely that Paul was not kind of coming up with this idea of Father, Son, and Spirit out of the ether. Instead, he was writing down what the early church already believed about their faith. This was already being used in the liturgy of the church, the way that the church prayed and thought about itself and their beliefs about God.

And as the early church saw this language repeated over and over again in Scripture, and as it began to be repeated in liturgy, the church gradually came to a greater understanding of what this meant. So though it took a while for the Trinity to be kind of like named and codified and turned into doctrine, forms of Trinitarian thought did exist from the very early days of the church. I want to now move into an illustration of the Trinity. I think the best way is to see it visually. So on the screen above you or in front of you, yes, there will be an image of a famous depiction of the Trinity. This painting was created by a Russian artist, Andrei Rublev, in the 15th century. And if you look in the background, kind of like in the left corner there, you'll see a house. And then in the background, you'll see an oak tree. So this painting was inspired by an Old Testament story, actually, about Abraham being visited by three strangers in Genesis 20.

And later, this painting also came to symbolize the Trinity. As Christians, we interpreted the story as a sign of the three men being the Trinity, being an expression of God. And in the painting, you can see the three figures of the Trinity clearly, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And I do also want to name here that I will be using the language of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, just because that's the way that the Christian tradition has historically understood it. However, I have heard people use language that does not imply a hierarchical patriarchal framework.

[10 : 28] So Father and Son can kind of be interpreted to mean that the Father is above the Son and the Son is below the Spirit. However, I've also heard people use the language of mother, child, and Spirit, parent, child, Spirit. I use the language of Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer at the beginning of this sermon. And I mention this because the language that we use for God matters. If we believe that we can only ever use masculine language for God, or if we use masculine language for two out of the three members of the Trinity, then that changes the way we see God. Every way that we kind of try to explain God matters, because each brings us closer to different aspects of God's character.

So I want us to look at this painting to talk more about the three members of the Trinity and their relationship with each other, because it illustrates it very well. So on the left side, you'll see God, the Father. And it is a little bit hard to see on this painting, but he is holding a cup. And that cup is being passed to the Christ figure. And then the Christ figure, if you notice, that he is extending two fingers of his left hand to the third figure, which is the Holy Spirit. So you see that this forms a kind of circle, that they are referencing each other, that they are beckoning to each other and drawing each other in. No one person of the Trinity can exist without the other. We need the Father, Son, and Spirit. And more importantly, the Father, Son, and Spirit need each other. Without any member of the Trinity, God would not be God. And so this is part of what we mean when we say that the Trinity is three persons in one. And there is another useful diagram that helps us parse out this relationship a little bit more. And I want to note here also that if you feel more comfortable, you can use more inclusive language than Father, Son, and Spirit, like creator, redeemer, sustainer, whatever you feel more comfortable with. And so on the triangle part of it, the outside, you see that the Father is not the Son. The Son is not the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is not the Father. However, the Father is God. The Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. It is the relationship between the three of them that reveals the truest nature of the one God. And I have been trying to think of ways to kind of explain this in a way that will make sense. And I looked at a rubber band analogy. So like, imagine that you are stretching out a rubber band as far as it can go. That's kind of what happens when we stretch out the Trinity and talk about each of the members individually. You talk about the Father, you talk about the Son, you talk about the Holy Spirit. However, you stretch it out too much, and it will snap.

You have to let it fall back into place. So similarly, when we talk about the Trinity, yes, we could talk about the three individually, but we have to recognize that they are all meant to be in unity.

And it is only when they are in unity that they are truly God. Also, there is no hierarchy in the relationships between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It's a triangle. It's not a pyramid. So the Father is not set above the Son, nor is the Son set above the Father. And the Spirit is not this disembodied presence that is inferior to both. Instead, you see the equality in the painting of Rubalab's Trinity that I showed you earlier. They are sitting around a table together, enjoying each other's company, mutually dwelling in each other. The second you try to separate one member of the Trinity from the other, you're missing the deep connection between the three. Each member of the Trinity mutually abides in one another to the point where you can't tell where one ends and the other begins. It's this flow of give and take, and it's this divine dance, if you will, where the Father, Son, and Spirit move in and around and through one another. We can turn to Scripture to help us understand more about how this relationship works. In John 14, Jesus talks to his disciples about his relationship to God the Father.

In John chapter 14, 6 through 7, you can read, Jesus said to him, meaning Thomas and the other disciples, I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

[15 : 15] If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on, you do know him and have seen him. In this verse, Jesus reveals that his will and the will of God the Father is the same. There is no separation between the two. This idea is so important because it changes the way we view Jesus' ministry. Too often, we separate what the Father wants from what the Son wants. I was always taught that God needed Jesus to die on the cross in order to forgive us. So it's almost as though God and Jesus were actually on opposite sides. On the one side, there is God who is so perfectly holy and just that he cannot be in the presence of sin. And God was unable to forgive us because we were just so sinful.

And then on the other side, you have Jesus, the Son, pleading with God, saying like, I want them to be forgiven. Please forgive them. And so God is like, well, okay, you want them to be forgiven? You need to die for them. And then I'll see them the way that I see you. So it sets up the Father and the Son at cross purposes. However, there has never been a time when the Father and the Son have not been in perfect accord about their love for us. There has never been a moment that God has turned away from us. God has only ever been trying to remind us of God's endless love for us. So Jesus was sent as a reminder that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God. Not evil, not sin, not death. Nothing. God the Father, God the Son, they are always acting for a restoration and healing.

And the same thing is true for the Holy Spirit. Later on in John 14, in verses 16 and 17, Jesus tells his disciples, and I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him, nor knows him. You know him, because he abides in you, and he will be in you. The advocate is the Spirit of God. We see in Genesis, for example, that God breathed into us the breath of life, the Spirit.

And so the Son asks the Father, and the Father sends the Spirit of God to be with us. And the Holy Spirit is God. So the Holy Spirit is dwelling inside of us. God the Father, God the Son, God the Spirit are always working to bring us into relationship with him. Now, all this explanation is all well and good, but what does the Trinity actually reveal about God? Why do we affirm this kind of strange, complicated doctrine? The fullness of God can be most clearly seen in this language of the Trinity. Our ideas about God matter, because the way that we conceptualize God can influence everything about our lives. And the Trinity reveals that community is at the very core of God's being. Now, I can't express this idea more clearly. If you got absolutely nothing else from this sermon, I hope that you remember this point. If you drill down to the core of God's being, you will encounter a deeply relational God. From before the start of creation all the way to this present moment, God has never been alone. God has always existed in perfect, self-giving, other-centered love. Richard Rohr puts it like this. In the beginning, there was relationship. At a fundamental level, God knows what it is like to love the other, to know that the other is in some ways not other at all, but a part of us. Each member of the Trinity is involved in this beautiful dance of difference. They retain their individuality, and yet they are all part of this unity. They are weaving in and around each other, giving and receiving in equal measure. God has always been the expression of love itself. American theologian Greg Boyd puts it like this, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, God is from all eternity, a self-giving God who pours himself out for another. Indeed, this is not something, this is not only something the three persons of the

Trinity do. This is who the triune God eternally is. In the Trinity, there is love that only ever eternally embraces the other. It is love that is designed at its most fundamental level to be shared. It is meant to create life, true, flourishing life for all. The relationships within the Trinity are creative, redemptive, and sustaining.

[20 : 17] And the love in the Trinity is not only meant for them. It is not self-centered. It is not insular. Instead, it is only ever expansive, mutual, abiding, never-ending. Imagine that moment in your life when you felt most deeply seen, known, and loved. And then imagine that moment when you felt like you most deeply saw, knew, and loved someone else. That's what it's like in the Trinity, all the time, always.

And this brings me back to the start of the sermon about why I find the Trinity so endlessly beautiful. So I want to ask one last question. Why should the Trinity matter to us? And to answer that question, I want to return to the image of Rublev's Trinity. I have already talked in how you can see in this painting that each member of the Trinity is subtly beckoning to the other ones, that they are rejoicing in their presence with one another. They are at this table having just the complete embodiment of love.

This painting has also been used by Christians throughout the centuries as a devotional tool. So people will look at the painting and meditate on it and try to find their way inside of it.

So if you look at the very center of the painting, it is almost as though there is a fourth seat at the table. And they are inclining towards you, the person who is viewing the painting.

It is like the triune God is waiting for us to join them there, in that circle, at that table. Friends, the more beautiful gospel for us today is that we are invited into the communion of the Trinity.

[22 : 16] This invitation shows up in Matthew 28, 19, when we are called to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. For the earliest Christians all the way up to the present day, baptism has been a sign that we are included in this glorious community of Father, Son, and Spirit.

Where before we did not belong, now we do. And then in John 15, Jesus gives us this beautiful metaphor of the vine and the branches.

In verse 4, Jesus urges us, Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.

And then in verses 9 and 10, you can read, As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love.

Just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. So the Father abides in the Son, the Son abides in the Father, and the Spirit abides in them both.

[23 : 31] The Holy Spirit has already been given to us as an advocate, as we have seen in John 14. The Holy Spirit rests in us. And so we are invited into this unending community of the Trinity.

It took me a while to sit with this idea, to let it sink into my soul, to let it become not just something that I thought, but something that I felt. And when I did that, it began to heal those parts of me that wondered if true connection and true belonging was possible.

There have been times when I have wondered if we do, in fact, live in a lonely universe. The Trinity has shown me that true belonging and true connection is not only possible, it has existed before the start of time itself.

In the beginning, there was relationship. Father, Spirit, Son, mutually abiding in one another, in perfect unity and love, rejoicing in their diversity, resting in their community.

If God is three, there has always been this community. There was never a time when the Trinity was not, when love for the other did not exist. Instead of loneliness, there is community.

[24 : 51] Instead of alienation, there is love. Self-sacrificing, other-centered love. And this love is seeking a way to include me, too, because it's where I've always belonged.

God is inherently relational and has created us for relationship. So we belong. And sometimes, this is a lot easier said than believed.

There are moments when I can only remind myself of this truth without really feeling it. But when I feel the most alone, the beauty of the Trinity reminds me that I am always being beckoned into community and belonging.

There will never be a time when we do not belong with God, when God does not want an intimate relationship with us. We are called to join the circle, and the circle is never closed.

Just as we are invited into communion with the Trinity, we are called to invite others into communion as well. And this is part of the reason why I became the director of community here.

[25 : 56] It is part of the reason why I recognize God calling me to pastor. I know the crushing pain of not fitting in, not being included, and I know what it's like to feel like there's not a place for me at church.

To feel like I will always be in the outskirts. And I do not want anybody else to feel that same sense of loneliness, isolation, and disconnection. So I remind myself every day that the triune God sees me, knows me, loves me, and is drawing me closer into this community.

And when I do that, I recognize that the same is true for everybody around me. I want everybody to know that they are in a place where they can belong, especially if they have never felt that in church before.

Because the church has often done a bad job at making sure people feel included. However, the Trinity shows us that we always belong in community, that God is always drawing us into community with God's self.

That there will never be a time that we do not belong with God. At the table, we are trying to move away from those beliefs that exclude and marginalize people who have struggled to find places to belong in the church.

[27 : 10] Instead, we are seeking to create spaces that remind folks that there is always a place for them in this community, especially if all you've ever heard is the opposite. It doesn't matter who you are, it doesn't matter your race, your gender, your sexuality, your gender expression, any other factor that has kept you away from the church.

Instead, what the table wants to tell everybody is that you do belong in this community, that God is always bringing you back into relationship.

So we are seeking ways of being in relationship with one another that affirms both our unity and our diversity. The glorious ways we all display the glory of God.

The Trinity is a reminder that such a way of being is not only possible, but that it has always existed. And we are invited to participate in making it a reality here on earth.

So as the table, we are moving toward ways of being that embody true communion, where people can be fully seen, known, and loved for who they are, where they can belong.

[28 : 14] My prayer is that the triune God would forever draw us into that way of being. So I want to end with two questions for you to ponder throughout your week. How are you being drawn into communion with the triune God this week?

And how can you draw others into that community as well? May we all find ways to see how God is creating, redeeming, and sustaining us this week and drawing us into communities that show the depths of God's love for each and every single one of us.

Amen. Amen. Amen.