

“I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. ¹³ But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. ¹⁴ He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. ¹⁵ All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you.” (John 16:12-15)

Does the Trinity Still Matter?

Does the doctrine of the Trinity matter anymore? Obviously, we stand by it. But how big of an issue should we make it? This teaching has been attacked for generations. It’s easy to find websites that call it confusing and downright ridiculous to insist on. But today is the Festival of Holy Trinity. So does that mean you can expect a long, confusing diatribe using a whole pile of great big, scary, theological words? Well, I hope not. But is it worth the effort to spend a whole Sunday on this teaching? Yes, because God reveals himself this way. Now, there is no teaching of the scripture that is more complex than the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and only one that’s on the same level, the teaching that Jesus is both God and man. I have big, thick books on the shelf in my office about this teaching and yes, they do use all kinds of big, scary, theological words. You don’t have to know all that stuff to get to heaven. But you do need to know the one true God. You do need to trust in the God who reveals himself in the Bible. You do need to understand on a basic level what we confess and that’s why we have a holiday like today.

I.

Does the doctrine of the Trinity still matter? Yes, because it shows us how God saves us. Finally, the Church, the gospel, the Scriptures are about getting us to heaven. Our big problem in life is that we’re all sinners who are going to die someday and who deserve to go to hell. All the hurt and sorrow that goes with life here is really just a subpoint of that fundamental truth. God reveals himself to us to overcome sin and death and hell. When we see the Trinity in the Scriptures, invariably, we see God acting to bring us home to heaven – and to comfort us on the way.

What does the doctrine of the Trinity teach? It teaches a three in one God. What do I mean by that? Well, how many gods do we worship? Just one, right? We can never say “Father, Son and Holy Spirit” in a way that sounds like three different gods or even three separate pieces of God. Yet, we do believe that there are three persons in the Godhead. What does that mean? To a certain degree, I don’t know. There is a deep mystery here. But we can see that Jesus is not the Father or the Holy Spirit. Yet Jesus and the Father and the Spirit are all one God. They’re not each three parts or pieces of God. Each person is all of God, yet they’re still separate. Confused yet? I’m not surprised. There is more to this than the human mind can comprehend. So naturally, we try to come up with some analogy that will help us understand. I think the most common is a three leaf clover. But you know what? No analogy really works, because God is not like anything in the created universe. So while analogies have a certain usefulness, they also create their own kind of confusion.

The Bible never uses an analogy to explain this teaching to us. But in our gospel lesson for today, we see one of the ways that the Bible talks about the Trinity. Jesus says that the Holy Spirit will take from what is his and give it to us. He says that all that belongs to the Father belongs to Jesus. He also says that Spirit won’t speak on his own, but will only speak what he hears from the other two persons of the Trinity. Again and again the Bible shows us the persons of the Trinity as real, separate persons, but it keeps telling us that there is only one God.

Jesus is talking about how the persons interact with each other. Sometimes we call that the internal works of the Trinity. You can only really distinguish the persons when they interact with each other. For instance, the Father begets the Son. No one else does that to Jesus and no one else is begotten from the Father. The Father and the Son together send the Spirit and so on. In these moments when they are acting on each other, we see clearly that the persons are real. The ancient church struggled with the doctrine of the Trinity for centuries. One way some people tried to explain it was to say that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit weren’t really separate persons. They were masks God wore to make it easier for us to understand him. So sometimes he appeared as the Father or the Spirit. But when we see them interacting among each other, we see that’s not the case. The Father, the Son and the Spirit are three separate persons.

The practical side of that is what each person then does for us. The Holy Spirit hears the counsels of God and brings them to us. He leads us into all truth. When Jesus left this world, he didn't leave us alone. He sent the Holy Spirit to guide us and to work through the Church. Jesus himself took on human flesh as a result of the work of the Trinity. The Father sent his only begotten Son. The Holy Spirit caused the Virgin Mary to conceive without having sex. And the Son of God entered her womb and took on human flesh and lived and died and rose for us, so that we will reach eternal life. Each person of the Trinity is a part of that work. If we lose the contribution of any of them, we lose the work of all. We lose eternal life. So we confess the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. While it may be true that you've never really thought much about the internal works of the Trinity before, it is also true that you know that Jesus is the Son of God. That the Father begat him before time began. That the Holy Spirit comes from the Father and the Son. You know and trust in the one true God and he saves you.

II.

This isn't an easy teaching. But who ever said that everything about God should be easy? People who complain about the doctrine of the Trinity seem to think that we human beings should be able to wrap our heads around God without any problem. But let me ask you, how much do you know about physics? What's the difference between dark matter and regular matter? My father-in-law is a scientist and he was telling me the other day that he was trying to teach that concept to pastors. And he kept bogging down on all this higher level math that most of us here today – and certainly most pastors – just wouldn't understand. Learning to speak a foreign language a certain level of intellectual ability. So does being a doctor or an engineer. There are concepts in all those fields that are hard. So why does it bother us that there are things about God that are hard? Being hard does not mean untrue. The doctrine of the Trinity is hard. But it is the revelation of the one true God who saves us. And that is the point. **Does the doctrine of the Trinity matter? Yes, because it shows who it is who saves us.**

Those three persons constitute the one God who made the world, the one God who judges the world, the one God who moved heaven and earth to save the world. So on the one hand we see the individual persons doing things to each other: the Father entrusts judgment to the Son, the Spirit gives glory to the Son. But when God deals with things outside of himself – when he deals with us – we only get glimpses of the persons. There is only one God we're talking about and trusting in.

We usually say God the Father created the world. That's usually what the Bible says, too. But the Bible also says that the Father created the world through the Son and that the Son sustains all things by his powerful word. The Bible pictures the Holy Spirit there on the first day of creation, even before light was created, hovering over the waters, like a mom hovering over soup that she's making. So it isn't only the Father who creates the world. Likewise, the Bible usually says that the Holy Spirit gives us faith. But the Bible also says that the Father and the Son do that. So when God acts on us, we cannot always clearly distinguish between the persons, because one God saves us.

The one true God hates our sin. The one true God created the world and gave Adam and Eve one simple command: "Don't eat from the tree!" The one true God expelled them from the garden when they ate and cursed them and the world we all still live in. Yet, that one true God also promised that Jesus would come and save us. The Father sent his Son. The Son took on flesh and died and rose. The Holy Spirit caused the Virgin to conceive and also came on the Son in power at his baptism. But it was the Holy Trinity that worked our salvation for us.

Jesus tells us in no uncertain terms that no one comes to the Father except through him. You cannot reach eternal life unless you believe in Jesus, the Son of God made flesh. You cannot reach eternal life unless you trust in his work to win that life for you. Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to give us faith in that work and the Spirit tells us what he heard before the world began. He tells us of God's plan to enter his creation and die and rise so that we will live. The Spirit tells us and he works in our hearts so that we trust in what God has done.

So yes, it's hard. But in love, God teaches these truths to us. In love, God reaches across the divide that sin creates and he challenges us to hear and to wrestle and to grow in faith. God does more than just spoon feed us "Jesus loves me, this I know." That little children's song is true and for that reason, it is much loved. But God doesn't stop at the kindergarten level. He loves you and calls you to grow in faith and knowledge, to grow in grace, to search the scriptures and challenge the laziness of your sinful heart that thinks that God should

never say anything hard. He's God! He is beyond all human understanding. We will spend eternity studying him and wondering at him and discovering new depths of his love. Explore his love now.

We live in age that just doesn't see the point. The problem as we know it began with the Enlightenment, the movement in Europe that gave birth to the modern scientific method. Over a period of several centuries, it questioned all that the Bible says and finally reached a point where it conveyed the idea that all this stuff just doesn't matter. If you want to spend your time wondering about it you can, but don't ask the rest of us to care. So today, most people's default setting is that this teaching is too complex and too illogical to really bother with. It's "pastor stuff" as a young man once called all the hard things in the Bible. And that leads to a dismissal of all the complicated things God says. Our world – if it can tolerate religion at all – wants a simple set of rules: be nice, don't be a racist or sexist or a homophobe, and by all means, don't assume that the people in the past ever said anything that is really binding on you today.

That attitude is sin. But rather than sitting here this morning and condemning the world out there and patting ourselves on the back, we need to recognize just how easy it is for us to buy into that sin. Our sinful hearts don't want to get a headache from church doctrines. While it is true that you don't have to know all the big, scary, theological words to get to heaven, you most certainly do need to know the God who saved you. You need to know the Father who saw your sinful heart and the theological laziness it would breed before the world began and he planned to send his Son to save you from it. You need to know the only begotten Son of God who took on human flesh and lived a life of perfect devotion to God in your place, who always cared about the depths of God's word for you, and who then died and paid for all your sin, the obvious ones and the sin that only lives in your heart. That Son of God then rose to give you eternal life. You need to know the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who worked in the womb of the Virgin Mary to bring Christ into the world, who inspired the apostles and prophets to bring us the Holy Scriptures, who was sent into our hearts through the gospel message and he created our faith and he feeds it still. We need to know the one true God, the only God that can conquer our sin and bring us home to heaven, the God who promises to take care of us along the way so that we get there. By the grace of that Triune God, you do know him. Be glad and be willing to delve deep into his word and know him better. Amen.