



## TRINITY MATTERS

May 22, 2016 Trinity Sunday

John 16:12-15

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Theme: The doctrine of the Trinity matters because it shapes how we think about both God and life.

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*Great God, whose perfect truth is beyond human thought, forgive us when we speak of You as if our little words could box You in. Nevertheless, give us the courage to speak about You anyway, indeed to think about You deeply. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in you sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.*

So here it is, a chock-a-block Trinity Sunday. We're receiving new members; *and* we're celebrating the sacrament of communion, *and* it's Strawberry Festival Sunday, *and* the preacher's going to talk about the doctrine of the Holy Trinity – all before the ice cream melts!

A lot of good Christians seem to think the whole idea of the Trinity is an arcane theological footnote, something they're *supposed* to believe but that doesn't *really* matter to their actual lives. So I'm here to reason with you that the Trinity really does matter to your 2016 New York lives, that it matters for at least two reasons – all before the ice cream melts.

Reason one... Trinity matters because it shapes how we think about God. It shapes how we think about God in a way that is both faithful to Scripture and that faithfully imagines the depths of the Divine Reality. The word Trinity never appears in the Bible. The Bible speaks of God with metaphors like "Father and Creator," but it's only later that Christians name this "The First Person of the Trinity." The Bible speaks of God's self-disclosure in the life of Jesus Christ, the Son, but it's only later that Christians name this "The Second Person of the



Trinity.” The Bible speaks about God as the immediate, “Present-Tense-of God,” the “Holy Spirit,” but it’s only later that Christians name this “The Third Person of the Trinity.”

The Bible may never say the word, but Scripture consistently points toward Trinity. The passage Don read is just one of many instances. Jesus is speaking to his disciples and points to the Trinity without ever using the word. He speaks of the Father and He speaks of the Spirit, both in relationship with Himself. The Trinity matters simply because it faithfully encapsulates the narrative of God in Scripture.

Trinity also imagines God in a way that reflects the depths of the Divine Mystery. Our world wants things simple. The 6:30 news edits complex stories to 90 seconds of half-truth. Twitter compresses to it 140 characters, hopelessly inadequate to truth’s subtlety. Politician tells us the problem’s simple when it’s anything but.

Our world even wants *God* simple. And of all the things that are not simple, God is the least simple! So Christians climb uphill when we stubbornly refuse to make God too small. The 18th century German mystic Gerhard Tersteegen wrote, “*A God understood, a God comprehended, is no God.*” The French have a sweet way of saying the same thing; it even rhymes – “*Le Dieu defini c'est la Dieu fini.*” “*God defined is God finished.*” The very *mysteriousness* of the Trinity works to guard the mystery of God. So in affirming the Trinity, we not only remember the full story of God in the Bible, but we also remember that we dare not simplify God.

No one has been helped me understand the Trinity more than (of all people) Dorothy Sayers, the creator of the Lord Peter Wimsey mystery novels. Miss Sayers was also something of an early feminist, a devout Christian and staunch defender of demanding religious thinking in the face of anyone who said they wanted deep faith without deep thought.



Miss Sayers writes that the Trinity, the essential three-ness of God, actually reflects *all* action and creativity. Reality, she says, is itself three-fold. In her play, “The Zeal for Thy House,” she has the archangel make this fine speech. (This is subtle, so listen hard.) *“For every work (or act) of creation is threefold, an earthly trinity to match the heavenly. First, there is the Creative Idea, passionless, timeless, beholding the whole work complete at once, the end in the beginning: and this is the image of the Father. Second, there is the Creative... Activity begotten of that Idea, working in time from the beginning to the end, with sweat and passion, being incarnate in the bonds of matter: this is the image of the Word. Third, there is the creative Power, the meaning of the work and its response in the lively soul: and this is the image of the indwelling Spirit.”*

If the Archangel is too obtuse for you, Miss Sayers explains her point by using an analogy she knows well – the act of a creative artist, specifically the act of writing a book. First, she says, there is the *Idea* for the book. The Idea exists only in the writer's head. Nobody else can see it or know anything about it. It's pure being, pure thought, ontological reality, a mystery known only to itself. This corresponds to the First Person of the Trinity, God-the-Father as ontological reality, interior, unknown and unknowable.

But then, she says, when the Idea is put down on paper and becomes a Book, when it exists in space and time, it becomes the *Word, Logos* – a living, tangible expression that reveals the pure Idea that was in the head of the Creator. This Book is an incarnate thing, ink and paper. It corresponds to the activity of God in time, especially to Jesus Christ who was “the Word” made flesh, the earthly corporeality that incarnates the pure Idea that is God in God's self.

But (and here her analogy finds its genius) – the Book is nothing but ink and paper until somebody actually reads it. Then, if it is a good book, in the reading it becomes *Power* in the mind and imagination of the reader. This corresponds to the Spirit, the personal experience of the pure Idea that was made incarnate in the Book. So, reason one that the Trinity matters is just this – it imagines God in a



way that is both faithful to the Bible and faithful to reality and experience, both divine and human.

Reason two that the Trinity matters. The Trinity shapes – or at least *should* shape – what we think matters in life. Here’s what I mean. God understood as Trinity is by definition a Divine Reality who passionately and tirelessly longs for *relationship*. God the Father entered history to speak to Israel in the drama of the Old Testament. God the Redeemer reached out to us in Jesus Christ, a human person like us. God the Sustainer is present with us in the Holy Spirit. This is a God whose every act is an outward extension of the Divine Self, a reaching out of the Divine Being toward humanity in love.

And not only does this God love us (but here’s where this Trinity business gets major) God as Trinity actually *is* love. God as Trinity is – in God's very “self,” by God's very “nature” – loving relationship. For me, this is the most transforming affirmation imbedded in the ancient doctrine of the Trinity – the towering truth that is the heart of it all, the ultimate reality of the universe, the *Mysterium Tremendum*, is a God who *is* love, a God who *is* relationship, a God who *is* communion.

Think of what this means, dear ones. It means that the core truth of the universe is *relationship*, a relationship of intense love and profound communion. Trinity insists that God is not just some passionless Ground of Being, not merely an abstract Prime Mover, not an impossibly demanding Law-Giver, not an old man on a cloud. Trinity insists that God is nothing less than love itself.

God is communion.

God is relationship.

God is passion.

Let me end by throwing down the gauntlet. If the deepest truth about God is that God is love, if the deepest truth is that God is relationship, communion, intimacy, it means nothing less than this...

*Everything that promotes, nourishes, deepens and sustains relationships of love, trust, communion and intimacy is God-like.*



*Everything that severs, kills, demeans, trivializes and hampers relationships of love is actually un-Godly.*

In a word, God as Trinity means that everything we do, *everything* – what we say to a stranger at the Strawberry Festival, the way we dish up food at the Friday night homeless meal, the nails our kids pound on the senior high mission trip next month, the way we speak to a harried waitress, the checks we write, the choices we make at the office, every word we utter, whom we love, how we love, the sacrifices we make for family and church, the way we relate to each other in our congregation, *all of it is called to reflect the perfect communion of love that is the very nature of God.*

Trinity matters because it declares that the Heart of it All, the First and Last Word, the Ultimate Reality, the Center of the Cosmos – however you name God – is nothing less than burning love and life-giving relationship.

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*