



SERMONS THAT WORK

Trinity Sunday (A)

[RCL] Genesis 1:1-2:4a; Psalm 8 or Canticle 2 or 13; 2 Corinthians 13:11-13; Matthew 28:16-20

Loving the Trinity

Tell your typical Episcopal congregation that God is love, and you are likely to be greeted with smiles. Even some nodding of heads. If you continue and tell them that God is Trinity, then those smiling faces may fall into blank stares, maybe even a few grimaces. The nodding heads may drop, chin to chest, hands on knees, assuming the crash position.

Yet the exuberant claim that God is love is intimately connected to the claim that God is Trinity. St. Augustine once said, “if you see love, you see the Trinity.” “How so?” we might ask.

The first thing to note is that love is perhaps the best place to start when talking about God as Trinity. In the First Epistle of John, we hear this: “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them” (1 John 4:16). This statement is a better place to start thinking about the Trinity than say, shamrocks (three leaves, one plant), H₂O (liquid, solid, gas), or the sun (star, light, heat)—all of which are flawed and tend toward heresy. The statement that God is love also has the obvious benefit of being in the Bible.

In the high Middle Ages, Richard of St. Victor showed how reflecting on love can lead us to think of God as Trinity. Here’s his way of thinking, with some modern updates. We begin with the basic claim: God is love. A beautiful, biblical truth, as we have seen. Now, think for a moment about what it means to say that God is love, with the emphasis on God. God, we believe, is the most perfect, the greatest, the most truly good and beautiful “thing”—that is thing-in-scare quotes—we can imagine. In fact, God is so perfect, great, true, good, and beautiful that God is beyond thingness, beyond being any-thing whatsoever. God is the Being beyond all beings, the Someone from whom all things and all someones in the universe come—rather than some-thing or some-one in the universe. So, if God is love, then the love that is God must also be the most perfect, the greatest, the most truly good and beautiful love we can imagine.

Now let’s think about the most perfect, the greatest, the most truly good and beautiful love we can imagine, with the emphasis on love. Could this most perfect love be a single, solitary thing? Richard of St. Victor thinks the obvious answer is, “No, of course, not.” The nature of love is to be directed towards someone or something. Perfect love cannot be directed solely toward itself. Love flows.

We know, to be sure, that the love of God flows into all of creation and into every trembling heart. We give thanks to God for the goodness and love made known to us in creation, in the calling of Israel to be God's people, and above all in the Word made flesh, Jesus God's Son. More on that later. But for the moment, Richard would have us reflect on the fact that a perfect love must, first and foremost, flow *toward* another perfect being, a being who is also the most perfect, the greatest, the most truly good and beautiful thing we can imagine. So, to be perfect, a perfect love must flow towards another perfect being. Which is to say, the God who is love must be *inter*personal. If God is love, then there must be more than one perfect person who *are* this love. For Richard, this is the perfect love of the Father for the Son and of the Son for the Father.

Sounds perfect, right? Well, according to Richard, almost, but not yet. According to him, perfect love cannot consist in a closed circle of two persons loving one another. Perfect love cannot be about "just the two of us." Perfect love—the greatest, the most truly good and beautiful love we can imagine—must overflow from the two persons toward another person, who is also the most perfect, the greatest, the most truly good and beautiful thing we can imagine. For Richard, this third person is the Holy Spirit, the perfect love that overflows from the love of the Father for the Son and of the Son for the Father.

So, if God is love, then God is perfect love. And if God is perfect love, then God is interpersonal love. And if God is interpersonal love, then God is triune love. Therefore, if God is love, God is Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

That, at least, is how Richard sees it. And, indeed, it is quite a faithful and beautiful way to think about the Trinity. It is certainly better than analogies drawn from shamrocks, H₂O, and the sun.

But perhaps the most faithful and beautiful way to think about the Trinity is found in another basic affirmation of the Christian faith. That is that in Jesus Christ, we meet the love of God in flesh and bone.

In the Gospel of John, we hear another clear statement: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16). That is to say, in the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, God has acted by the power of the Holy Spirit to save the world. This is, in many ways, just rock-solid, basic Christianity. God, in love, has acted, by the power of the Holy Spirit in Jesus Christ, for us and for our salvation.

The Trinity is a theological way of making sense of this gospel message in light of the Bible's unwavering commitment to belief in one God. From beginning to end, in the Old Testament and the New Testament, scripture affirms a faith in the one God, the Holy One of Israel. Jesus himself quotes the ancient Jewish prayer, the *Shema*, which says, "Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." The early church maintains Israel's commitment to monotheism, to trust in and loyalty to one God. This is bedrock.

How then can we make sense of the salvation that we know in Jesus Christ? One skeptic might ask: Was Jesus really just a very special human being, a teacher or a prophet? The early church said "no." Jesus was truly human, but not only human, because one human being can't save other human beings. Only God can save humanity.

So, if only God can save human beings, then another skeptic might ask, was Jesus another God? The early church again said “no,” because, as we have seen, they remained committed to belief in one God.

This leaves us with the dazzling truth that the God we know in the salvation of Jesus Christ is the same God revealed in the Old Testament, the God who acted to redeem the people of Israel. And how do Christians know this? Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the gift of the transforming power of God’s love at work in Christian life and in the wider world.

The Trinity is basically a way of claiming this foundational truth: The God we know in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit is one God.

Saying “God is Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,” is a way of naming the God we know in the salvation of Jesus Christ. The action of God in Jesus Christ is the action of the God who is love from beginning to end. The God of love who created us out of and for love. The God of love who took on our humanity, took on the burden of our guilt, and put an end to it on the cross. The God of love who, through the Holy Spirit, now offers us forgiveness, so that we can participate in and share God’s forgiving love with the world.

God is love, a Trinity of loving persons, who gives out of love, forgives out of love, and calls us to participate in a community of love through our own acts of giving and forgiving.

And so in obedience to Jesus’s command in our Gospel lesson, we go and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. We baptize them in the name of the God who is love.

In baptism, we are buried with Christ in his death, share in his resurrection, and are reborn by the Holy Spirit. We are baptized not only in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but also into the very life of the God who is love. To be baptized in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is to participate in the love that is God, the love that moves the sun and the other stars, the love that is known in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the love that is poured into every trembling heart.

God is love. Those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Which is to say, God is Trinity. And those of us who are baptized in the name of the Trinity, abide in the love that is Trinity. And the love that is Trinity abides in us.

***The Rev. Dr. Joseph S. Pagano** is co-dean of the School for Ministry in the Episcopal Diocese of New Hampshire.*



Sermons that Work and Bible Studies that Work are a joint offering of Forward Movement and The Office of Communication at The Episcopal Church.

<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/bible-study/>

<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermons-that-work>