

Sermon: God as 3 is 4 Things (at least)

Scripture: selected trinitarian passages

Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans

Date: May 26, 2024

The doctrine of the Trinity can seem terribly tedious and abstract. To say that God is 3 persons but 1 God and that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the father and the son and not just from the Father and to say that they are the same essence but not the same person but the same God and so on and so forth, seems irrelevant to our lives at best and that there are better things you could be doing with your time on this Memorial Day Sunday than to consider why the Arian or Filioque controversy around the Trinity was so heated and where the Council of Nicaea finally landed on the doctrine. So, I'm not going to do THAT to you this morning, but what I have on offer instead is to lift up 4 reasons why Trinitarian theology, that the One God is actually 3, is really an amazing, beautiful and important notion. So in the math of transcendent reality: $1+1+1=1$ and God as 3 means 4 Things (at least).

First of all to speak of God as Trinity means that **God is not male but God is Love**. Wherever in the annals of history the human being conceived of God as Omnipotent Sovereign, All-Powerful Ruler of All, there was burned into our imaginations a never-changing strongman God up there in heaven to whom we project our requests and from whom we receive favor or disfavor, answered or unanswered prayer, salvation or damnation, depending on the mysterious calculations of HIS Divine Sovereignty. In this conception, God is the Greatest Thing of all things, the Greatest One of all ones, dependent on nothing, unchanging, the Ultimate Individual to

which all individuals must make an accounting of their lives. King of Kings. Lord of Lords.

This concept impinged of course on our conception of the human self as individuated and separate from creation, with maleness being the standard, and a dominion over creation, striving for sovereign power that reflected this Dominant Static Strongman God... and this of course at the expense of women and those without power.

But to say God is Trinity is to say something critically different. It's to say above and before all else that God within Godself is a relationship of love. It's not simply to say that God is loving – that's true too – but to say God is trinity is to say that God is in Godself Love that is going on, that is flowing between Father, Son and Spirit, the way it's named traditionally, but you can also say among Mother, Christ, and Sophia (or holy wisdom). In the trinitarian conception through Christ the human being is less ruled over by the Sovereign Lord and more drawn up into the love that is going on in the Godhead. God is Love happening. So the Trinity says **God is not male but God is Love.**

Secondly, to speak of God as Trinity, a flow of love among the 3, is to say that **God is not dominating and insisting but inviting and luring.** God as love flowing among the three – Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer – opens Godself out to creation in an act of love and invites us into the dance. There is no insisting that this is the way you must behave in order to have my love or this is what you must believe to have my favor and if you don't believe right or behave right then there's that big gaping maw of Hell awaiting you. No, God as Loving Trinity is deeply invitational, profoundly hospitable, more so than we could ever imagine, appealing to our true

selves, our deeper selves and all that is good in us to join the dance of love already going on.

And when there is someone who gets lost from the dance, Jesus says, one who wanders astray out of the flow, but returns again there is rejoicing in the heaven because that's what this trinitarian God of Love wants most for us. There's no threat for what's awaiting you if you don't accept the invitation, there's just profound desire for what is best for you.

Trinity says God is not insisting but inviting.

Third, maybe if God was just one we could grab Him and put him on our side over and against the others side. Maybe if God was 2 there could still be enough static in that one-to-one relationship to set Them up as ours. But once you being saying that God is three, things get a little out of hand and "sides" break down altogether. Third, to say God is Trinity is to say that **it's never us v them but always and only we together**. If God is a three-person romp of love already going on at the heart of the cosmos from all eternity into all eternity, there is no us versus them. God is not defined over and against anything, but rather to enter that dance that is happening in the Trinitarian Godhead, is to enter a place of WE, of course, it could be no other.

Ilia Delio, scientist theologian says "where there is God there is only oneness, there is no I-ness only we-ness, only community."¹ Only we-ness. You know the Spirit of the Trinitarian God is at work, erupting from transcendence into immanence when the divided I's becomes a we and where the separated me is drawn into community. This is the great challenge of our day for us as trinitarian Christians, as our culture has

¹ From You Tube Video – "God is Home" – with Elio Delia - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-uBN2bh2rjs>

become so cracked with sides taken and fissures expanding and stakes put in the ground, this is me and that is you and you're either with me or against me, these are our stripes our colors and those are yours. We know from the second person of the Trinity, the Son, Love Enfleshed, that our work is healing and reconciliation and the harrowing commitment to love all people and especially love in the face of hate and division. A Trinitarian God is **never a God of us v them but a God of we**, a we-ness God.

Finally, Elizabeth Johnson, a Catholic Feminist theologian and one of the most prominent writers on the intersection between ecology and theology, suggests the Trinity of God is like a life-giving DNA molecule which instead of 2 strands has 3 strands that are always combining and recombining to bring forth, to heal and repair, and to create ever new forms at the heart of the universe.² Bring Forth – the Mother-Creator. Heal and Repair – there's the Redeemer, Christ. And evolve ever new forms – That's the Sustainer Spirit. With God as Trinity we move away from a fixed notion of God and a fixed notion of the world. God as Trinity is not God as Creator of Creation once and for all but God who continues in Their dance of love to create. As Ilio Delia says: "We've had this idea that God creates this fixed universe when God is really quite at home with chaos and unknowingness and openness and future, for God loves the spontaneity of newness."³ So God as Trinity suggests **God is maybe not so much Old but God is Ever-New** for that's the nature of love, always opening out to new possibilities and new awarenesses and new creations.

² Elizabeth Johnson's article "A Trinitarian Way of Life" from the Center for Contemplation and Action, <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/a-trinitarian-way-of-life-2022-01-14/>

³ From You Tube Video – "God is Home" – with Elio Delia - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-uBN2bh2rjs>

To say God is three is to say at least 4 things: God is not male but God is love. God is not dominating but God is inviting. God is not about I-ness but about we-ness and God is not Old but Ever-New. Such images, conceptions, notions, for God can help us know best how to flourish as human beings as well when we opt for love, when we are hospitable, when we foster we-ness and stay supple, open to whatever new is emerging from what is past or lost or broken.

There was a child, as the story goes, who had made his mom and dad a lovely barnyard scene out of clay replete with a barn and little animals and a tree on a portion of a cardboard box. He left it at school for many days awaiting the clay to dry before he could bring it home. When the time finally came, he was filled with excitement and when he saw his dad outside the window, grabbed the barnyard scene on the cardboard and scurried out towards him moving faster and faster, in fact faster than his legs could carry him and tripped on the sidewalk and tumbling forward watched his barnyard scene rise in the air before it crashed to the concrete in pieces. The dad ran the extra steps to him as the boy crumpled to the ground stunned and then burst into tears. The first person near the boy said – “don’t cry, it’s alright” but when the dad reached the boy, he dad knelt down to him and held him in his arms with tears in his own eyes while the boy wept. They stayed that way for a little while and then after the boy settled a bit the dad said to him - ok, son, let’s pick up the pieces and see what we can make with what’s left.

What we are saying when we say that God is trinity is something like that - that God is the Father coming forth in love and joy at the presence of his child and God is the child seeking His Father in love and excitement but is broken on the wheels of living, and God is the love between the two of

them that is precious and profound and creative of something new. And WE are invited into that relationship. What an invitation!