

Trinity: What is it?
Sermon 4-23-17
Pastor Curtis Dehmey

2 Corinthians 13:13

¹³The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

Message:

Today we begin a 5-week sermon series on the Trinity. Today, we will focus on the basics of understanding the Trinity. The following weeks will be more focused on how our relationship with the Trinity or God plays out. What does it look like in real life? What does it look like in scripture? And this is no small task. The Trinity is probably one of the most difficult Christian Doctrine's to explain. You will not find the word "Trinity" anywhere in the Bible. Although, you are more than welcome to try to find the word "Trinity" in the Bible. Good luck. While I am going to try to explain the Trinity with a few analogies, none of them are perfect. Each analogy has its flaws or imperfections. In the wake of the movie coming out, "The Shack," I decided to read the book for the first time. Many of you may have heard of this fiction book by William P. Young. God has a funny way of tying things together in our lives sometimes. I wasn't looking for a book to assist with this sermon series. I didn't crack "The Shack" open for a greater understanding of the Trinity. Yet, God tied these two things together. So I'm going to use some excerpts from "The Shack" throughout my sermon to help explain what the "Trinity" is and how it works. I'll do my best not to spoil the book for those of you who haven't read it.

To give some backstory to "The Shack", the main character, Mack, is married and a father. Mack had a challenging upbringing. He's a church-goer. His family believes in God. And as you'll find out in the first few chapters of the book, something tragic happens in his life. This tragedy causes bitterness and despair in Mack. He becomes angry at God. And then he gets this strange note, signed "Papa" inviting him to the shack. The same shack where this tragedy happened. "Papa" is his wife's word for God. As crazy as it sounded, Mack felt drawn to go to the Shack to see who this "Papa" was. Indeed, it was God. God transforms this shack into an otherworldly, beautiful haven for Mack. Not only is Papa at this cabin, but Jesus and Sarayu are there as well. Papa is obviously the "Father" person of God. And Sarayu is the "Holy Spirit" person of God. And of course, Jesus.

One of the questions you may be asking is, “Why is this so important?” If the word “Trinity” is not in the Bible, why are we learning about this? The word “Trinity” may not be in the Bible, but there are plenty of references to God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. One example being the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the...” (Fill-it in). Understanding the Trinity to the best of our ability is important because it shapes our relationship with God. If you read the Shack, Mack has some distorted understanding of God or the Trinity and therefore, it shapes his relationship with God in ways that God is not. Here is an small example. After Mack confronts Papa about the tragedy, or *The Great Sadness*, as the book calls it, Mack says, “I think it’d be easier to have this conversation if you weren’t wearing a dress.’ Papa is an African-American woman in this story. Papa responded, ‘If it were easier, then I wouldn’t be, but *this* is a good place to start. I often find that getting head issues out of the way first makes the heart stuff easier to work on later...when you’re ready...Mackenzie, I am neither male nor female, even though both genders are derived from my nature. If I choose to appear to you as a man or a woman, it’s because I love you. For me to appear to you as a woman and suggest that you call me Papa is simply to mix metaphors, to help you keep from falling so easily back into your religious conditioning...To reveal myself to you as a very large, white grandfather figure with flowing beard, like Gandalf, would simply reinforce your religious stereotypes and this weekend is *not* about reinforcing your religious stereotypes.’” While we refer to the one person of the Trinity as “Father,” God is not male or female. This is the limits of language. The limits of humanity to explain and understand who God is. But if we only understand the “Father” as male, then we miss out on the feminine or motherly side of God. Or for those who have had horrible fathers, may have an estranged relationship with God, like Mack, because they see God as their abusive fathers. When that’s not who God is at all. Understanding the parent person of the trinity in its best form is understanding a parent who is benevolent. A parent who is loving. A parent who is nurturing. A parent who may discipline at times, but it comes from a place of love rather than for selfish gain or pleasure. Mack has this distorted view of who the Father person of the Trinity is.

When talking about the Trinity, we all tend to gravitate toward one erroneous belief versus another. This is the difficult part about the Trinity. We tend to believe more in the distinction of the Trinity or the unity of the Trinity. We tend to believe more in the distinction of the Trinity or the unity of the Trinity. Both in their extreme are wrong according to the early church Fathers who sat down and established this doctrine at the Council of Nicea in the year 325. If we believe too much in the distinctiveness of the Trinity. That the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three distinct entities. And they all operate in different ways. You

have a need for one thing, the Father comes. When you have a need for another, Jesus comes. And for another, the Holy Spirit comes. The problem is that this then becomes nothing more than us believing in 3 different gods. Similar to the Greek understanding of gods. That you pray to different gods for different needs. This then sets up issues surrounding Jesus' birth and resurrection. This creates problems for the role and understanding of the Holy Spirit. On the opposite extreme, if we believe in the total unity of God, then was Jesus human at all. Meaning, Jesus can't understand the human plight because it was simply God walking on earth. Therefore, God couldn't really die for our sins because he wasn't human. Or if there is this extreme unity of God, where does God reside? Heaven or earth? If the Holy Spirit is here, then God cannot be in heaven.

There is evidence in the Bible for both God's unity and God's distinction. We see God's unity in Genesis 1 and 2, "In the beginning when *God* created the heavens and the earth..." It goes on further to say "God said..." in each day of creation. God is one. It doesn't say Father, Son and Holy Spirit here. God is one. All three are present at the beginning of creation. In Exodus 20:2-3, "²I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³you shall have no other gods before me." In 1 Corinthians 8:4, "⁴Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that 'no idol in the world really exists,' and that 'there is no God but one.'" In Ephesians 4:6, "⁶one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all." John 10:30, "³⁰The Father and I are one." God is one. Father, Son and the Holy Spirit are one.

But then we also see the distinctiveness of God. John 4:34, "³⁴Jesus said to them, 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.'" John 5:19, "¹⁹Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise.'" 1 Corinthians 2:11, "¹¹For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God." 1 Corinthians 6:11, "¹¹And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God."

At the Council of Nicea in 325, this was a hot issue. They had probably been discussing this issue for over 100 years. Can you imagine discussing the hot issues of our day for that long? It would be grueling. So at Nicea in 325, they came up with an agreement. And this agreement we know as the Apostles Creed today. This is the original Apostles Creed, "We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten of the Father, that is, from the substance of the Father, God of God, light of light, true God of true God, begotten, not made both in heaven and on earth, who for us humans and for our salvation descended and

became incarnate, becoming human, suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended to the heavens, and will come to judge the living and the dead. And in the Holy Spirit. But those who say that there was when He was not, and that before being begotten He was not, or that He came from that which is not, or that the Son of God is of a different substance or essence, or that He is created, or mutable, these are the [universal] church anathematizes.”

Like I stated earlier, there are many analogies that we can use to explain the trinity. One such example is to say that the Trinity is like an equilateral triangle.

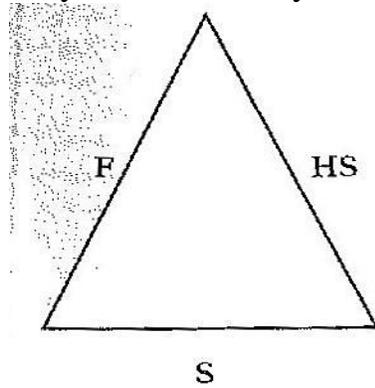


Figure A

Each person of the Trinity is equal and is one. This emphasizes the oneness of God. In “The Shack,” Mack discovers this principle as Sarayu or the Holy Spirit says, “You can’t share with one and not share with us all...” In other words, when you pray to the Father, you are praying to the Holy Spirit and to Jesus as well. And when you direct your prayers to the Holy Spirit, you are praying to the Father and Jesus as well. They are connected and one. They are not three separate gods.

But in our desire for independence as humans we tend to think of God like this:

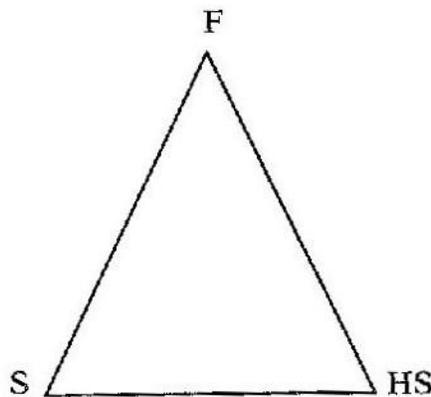


Figure B

The persons of the Trinity are at three distinct points. And in thinking this way, we tend to see hierarchy. That the “Father” is the “main” part of God and that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are lesser parts of God. While they may be distinct, it is not an unequal distinction. Another popular analogy is to think of God similar to H₂O, water. Water has three forms. Ice, steam and liquid. Similar to the Trinity, the Trinity has three different forms. While this is a pretty good analogy, the problem is, are the forms static or dynamic? In other words, if the Father is water, does he always stay as water? Or can He be ice and steam as well? This was one of the arguing points of the early church fathers at the Council of Nicea. The persons of the Trinity are not confined to certain forms, territories, boundaries or departments. Or as if each person of the Trinity plays three distinct roles. The early church fathers called this erroneous thought “modalism.” That each person of the Trinity plays a different mode of God. If Jesus is in one place, is the Father in another place? This thought breaks apart the oneness of God. Can you see why this can be such a confusing doctrine? Let’s give “The Shack” an attempt at explaining.

As Mack speaks to Jesus, he says, “I love the way you treat each other. It’s certainly not how I expected God to be...I know that you are one and all, and that there are three of you. But you respond with such graciousness to each other. Isn’t one of you more the boss than the other two?” The three looked at one another as if they had never thought of such a question. “I mean,” Mack hurried on, “I have always thought of God the Father as sort of being the boss and Jesus as the one following orders, you know, being obedient. I’m not sure how the Holy Spirit fits in exactly. He...I mean, she...uh...” “A free Spirit?” offered Papa. “Exactly—a free Spirit, but still under the direction of the Father. Does that make sense?” Jesus looked at Papa, obviously trying with some difficulty to maintain the perception of a very serious exterior. “Does that make sense to you, Abba? Frankly, I haven’t a clue what this man is talking about.” Papa scrunched her face up as if exerting great concentration. “Nope, I have been trying to make head or tail out of it, but sorry, he’s got me lost.” “You know what I am talking about.” Mack was a little frustrated. “I am talking about who’s in charge. Don’t you have a chain of command?” “Chain of command? That sounds ghastly!” Jesus said. “At least binding,” Papa added as they both started laughing...Then Sarayu responded, “Mackenzie, we have no concept of final authority among us, only unity. We are in a *circle* of relationship, not a chain of command or ‘great chain of being’ as your ancestors termed it. What you’re seeing here is relationship without any overlay of power. We don’t need power over the other because we are always looking out for the best. Hierarchy would make no sense among us. Actually, this is your problem, not ours.” “Really? How so?” “Humans are so lost and damaged that to you it is almost incomprehensible that people could work or live together without someone being in charge.”

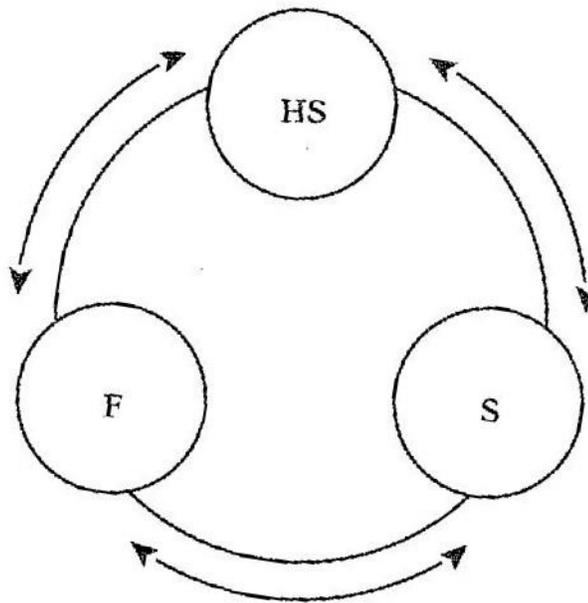


Figure C

This is probably the closest we're going to get to a good analogy of the Trinity. You can see that in the image behind me, the Trinity is a social circle. There is no hierarchy. As three distinct persons, they are connected to one another and are one. What the Father knows, Jesus and the Holy Spirit knows. When we pray to the Holy Spirit, the Father and Jesus hears what we are saying as well. In "The Shack" Jesus speaks to Papa at dinner time saying, "Papa, I loved watching you today, as you made yourself fully available to take Mack's pain into yourself, and then give him space to choose his own timing. You honored him, and you honored me. To listen to you whisper love and calm into his heart was truly incredible. What a joy to watch! I love being your son." Jesus was nowhere physically near Mack and Papa when they had that conversation. But Jesus knew what the Father knew. Because Jesus and the Father are one.

So why does this belief matter? Well...just imagine for a second that we believed God was actually three different gods. Wouldn't that make Christ's sacrifice pretty confusing? Would it hold less power? How would it work that God could sacrifice himself on the cross to become three gods? Who was taking on our sin? And then it would become a question of whom do we relate to? Which of the three gods is more powerful than the others? Who do we pray to? For our faith to make any sense, God is one. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit existed from the beginning. As John 1 says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people."

I won't go into "The Shack" book too much more. But I will summarize by saying that if you are having a hard time understanding how you relate to the Trinity, read "The Shack." Young does a wonderful job at illustrating how benevolent, loving and caring God is. He even talks about such hard questions as, "Why does God allow pain to exist?" There is a sweet tenderness in how the Trinity relates to one another and to the character Mack. It's the loving, caring and generous God we all want. God's intention is to be with us. To be among us. But too often we have veered off the path in a desire for greater independence from one another and from God. If you remember the other month when I preached on the Lord's prayer, Jesus invited us into this intimacy with the Father. Why would Jesus do that? Because when we are intimate with the Father, we are intimate with Jesus. When we are intimate with the Father, we are intimate with the Holy Spirit. When we are intimate with the Holy Spirit, we are intimate with the Father and Son. When we are intimate with Jesus, we are intimate with the Father and Holy Spirit. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you." Do you know God? Do you know the Father? Do you know the Son? Do you know the Holy Spirit? I invite you into this sweet relationship with the Trinity. With the God who has sacrificed and loved us beyond all that we can fathom. Amen.