

## **Why 3?**

Menno Mennonite Church  
May 30, 2021

**Purpose:** To explore the practical aspects of the doctrine of the trinity.

**Message:** the persons of the Trinitarian god give us distinct, important glimpses into who God ultimately is and is about.

**Scripture:** John 16:12-20 [I will read], Psalm 8, Proverbs 8:1-4; 22-31

**Synopsis:** The trinity is tricky, and not easily understood. Theologians have devoted years and volumes to the topic, and still we struggle with the concept of 3-in-1 and 1-in-three. It violates our fundamental understanding of what it is to be one thing and not another.

Yet we have the personages of God, each one filling a means of being God for us, perhaps so we can better grasp the vastness of God. The whys and wherefores are a big question indeed. Why do we hold on to this metaphor, and how do we see ourselves working within this complicated image of God? How do we retain what it is that works for us, and release that does not?

John 16:12-20 [the message]

“I still have many things to tell you,  
but you can’t handle them now.

But when the Friend comes,                    the Spirit of the Truth,

he will take you by the hand  
and guide you into all the truth there is.

He won’t draw attention to himself,  
but will make sense  
out of what is about to happen  
and, indeed,  
out of all that I have done and said.

The Spirit will honor me;  
he will take from me and deliver it to you.

Everything the Father has is also mine.  
That is why I’ve said, ‘He takes from me and delivers to you.’  
“In a day or so you’re not going to see me, but then in another day or so you will see me.”

That stirred up a hornet’s nest of questions among the disciples:

“What’s he talking about:  
‘In a day or so you’re not going to see me,  
but then in another day or so you will see me’?”

And, ‘Because I’m on my way to the Father’?  
What is this ‘day or so’?  
We don’t know what he’s talking about.”

Jesus knew they were dying  
to ask him what he meant, so he said,

“Are you trying to figure out  
among yourselves what I meant when I said,

‘In a day or so you’re not going to see me,  
but then in another day or so you will see me’?”

Then fix this firmly in your minds:  
You’re going to be in deep mourning  
while the godless world throws a party.  
You’ll be sad, very sad,  
but your sadness will develop into gladness.

Were I to begin a sermon saying to you all “I have so much to tell you about your faith and life, and all the rest, but it is just way too far beyond you now” I would have your attention. For all the wrong reasons to be sure, as you wonder what I was on about and perhaps writing me off as a bit of snob. But I would have your attention. No body wants to be left hanging. No body wants to be on the outside. It is easy to really start resenting the notion that there are things that we basically are not going to understand.

Yet that is precisely the case that we are presented with this morning. Today is Trinity Sunday where we celebrate the three-in-oneness and the one-in-threeness of the nature of God. For we who have grown up soaked in Christian culture and society, it is something that we take for granted, and acknowledge with about as much fluster as knowing that 2 and 2 equals four. We may not know all the ins and outs of it all, but it is the basic nature of our experience and explanation of God, so it is what it is. Yet when you venture outside the Christian world, this notion of trinity is often one of the biggest stumbling blocks there is to understanding faith in the first place. Take Islam for example; one of its fundamental articles of faith is that there is one and only one God. To come and try to explain “yes we agree, but God comes in three different flavors” doesn’t go so well. Perhaps this would be better entitled non sequitur Sunday and filing under that which doesn’t make a whole lot of sense. Fair warning: there are a whole bunch of admittedly somewhat wooly metaphors ahead, so do be prepared. The line between comprehensible and not here is vanishingly small, and I will do the best I may to keep it to one side, but with heady stuff like this, nothing is automatic. I have even encountered people turning to quantum physics to try to sort this one out, but that didn’t end well, so no need to worry.

We know how things are set up. We generally go to a graphical representation like this—something out of math book and a Venn Diagram. We have God the head, the Father, the maker of all things; Christ is the Son, the word incarnate who comes from God and out of God and ultimately is God as well as YHWH God. And then Son promises the coming of the Spirit of that same God, the advocate who comes to dwell in and around us forever more. So far, so good, right? But where we get ourselves in trouble is coming back to the beginning of all of this and saying repeatedly ‘Sure there is three of them, but there is only one God.’ It does not match up with the world as we know, at least not too terribly well. We are left to reconcile the nature of our experience of the world that tells us that one thing can only be one thing at a given time. As much as it may not seem to matter all that much outside being a bit of theological trivia, I

think that we do well to sit now and again with our basic notions of faith less to review them as factual realities, trying to get the mechanics right, but more to come to again to perhaps find a life within the notion that might not always or easily jump to mind.

In that, I would like you to sit with a different image. Its is an icon of the Eastern tradition, most often entitled “The Hospitality of Abraham”. It depicts the story of the visitation of the angels to Abraham and Sarah where 3 angels understood to be representations of YHWH God come and are welcomed as guests and entertained as such by the recipients of the covenant. The passage, long ago at the very beginning of the story of salvation has long been seen as a visitation of the Most High, giving a nod, perhaps to the trinitarian nature of God even back then. We often read the passage this way, referring back into this basic incident of faith history as informative of what comes next.

Look again at the icon. Study it a bit if you will. What do you notice? Icons, especially of the Eastern Christian tradition are meant to draw you in as an object of contemplation and inspiration. There is always more to notice. Each figure is the same size, each holding a rod, a symbol of authority. Each wears blue, depicting divinity, though the central figure, Christ, also wears red—the color of humanity. These figures are not specifically gendered and remain distinct from each other with similar look and demeanor. They are all looking between each other one to the next, symbolizing their unity of will yet remaining distinct as people. Notice too that the table is incomplete until you imagine yourself in the missing place of the table, part of the divine hospitality.

This is a visual description of the a concept called perichoresis. The first part-peri-means around, and the second is the root out of which we derive “Choreography”. The suggestion is that the trinity, this divine 3 in oneness is well described as a dancing of the divine, a movement of reciprocal motion where each participant is moving as part of singular whole.

At our wedding we offered contra dancing, bringing in a caller and music to invite all who had gathered to enjoy dancing together (last week Eric discusses drunkenness, and here I am with dancing—how’s that for life in a Mennonite Church). What I like about Contra dancing is that it is this old style of line dance which is partner based, but always in relation to and partnership with everyone else. There is going away and coming back. At floor level it all looks like fairly individual chaos. But when you watch the dance from afar (and with folks more adept than we were) the dance has its own pattern and will turning and moving around the space

making something completely new. In the same way, I think that is a good way to think of the trinity not only in fact of being three in one, but also considering the action involved as the God, Christ and Spirit swing around and in one another moving separately at their appointed moments, yet singularly together in purpose and form to accomplish the work of God with us.

If there is anything we collectively have learned (and I hope are learning) in this moment of pandemic upheaval is that technology, as ubiquitous as it is and connective though it may be is no substitute for direct present. We are discovering that as we have been re-connecting these parts of our lives over the last several weeks and months. Relationship is not only based on the communication that we can achieve via calls and zoom and all the rest (good to be sure, but not always great), but on the characteristics of relational love that connects us one to the next. Sometimes we just have to show up.

The same is true of God. YHWH God keeps showing up in the desire to continue relationship and covenant. God is the creator and takes great delight in we the creation and wants to be in relationship. So there is a relationship. Through all the challenges, brokenness, triumph, defeat, anger and pain, that covenantal relationship continues. God, in love, keeps coming back time and again to renew covenant, to build relationship, to offer mercy and forgiveness. God's love remains always.

In Jesus that love grows into the wholly human, wholly divine incarnational sense of the divine. The Word (God) made flesh to dwell among us. Still God because he is out of God. But God with us, in the here and now. Jesus laughs, cries, eats, teases, and remains loyal to his friends all the way through life, living in the love of relationship. 'Everything of the Father is mine' he says in the reading, meaning all of stuff that makes God, God is also makes Jesus God. There is no difference. Once that relationship that God began with us here on earth begins, it cannot end. God will not leave us without someone near to hand to relate to. So comes the spirit—the essence of God understood through the experience of Jesus given to us here and now to be with us, to activate us, and ultimately to bring us back to God who started this in the first place. The Spirit remains to explain it all to us, to inspire us to keep looking and to spark again and again that God's home remains always where it must be: with us, in us, around us and for us.

The way of God is the way of Love. That is the dance, always, and we are invited not just to sit and observe it from afar, but to take a step onto the floor and see what happens. God in love encounters us where we are, relating to us as we need to be related to—the form of a teacher

who changes and challenges; in the form of the creator who is apart, yet very near; in the form of the Holy Spirit which will not leave us alone, but rather whispers constantly to us the way of Love, inviting us in, calling us home. The theologian, pastor, and writer N. T Wright puts it well when he reminds us:

*“It would be a mistake to give the impression that the Christian doctrine of God is a matter of clever intellectual word games or mind games. For Christians it’s always a love game: God’s love for the world calling out an answering love from us, enabling us to discover that God not only happens to love us (as though this was simply one aspect of his character) but that God is love itself. That’s what many theological traditions have explored as the very heart of God’s own being, the love which passes continually between Father, Son, and Spirit.”*

The way of God is the way of Love. his fundamental understanding is more important than any slick metaphor, or cogent presentation of a complicated topic as the notion of the Trinity. We do not arrive at this confession and creed out of a need to be clever in what we say about God. Rather it is a response to knowing and encountering God’s love in its many ways and seeking to describe that which we have known, seen and heard along the way. At the end of all the theory and all the broken half metaphors, remember this: There is that of God for all of who you, who we are.

We are invited to dance with the natures of the one God and to be part of that which God is doing the many ways that God moves. That is what Trinity means, and how it changes so much of our lives for the better. That is something we can celebrate, and more importantly, live.