

Going in the Name of the Trinity
The Rev. Amy Spagna
Trinity Sunday – May 31, 2026
Genesis 1:1-2:4a; Matthew 28:16-20

The first Sunday of the long green growing season after Pentecost is otherwise known as Trinity Sunday. It's the only day on the liturgical calendar which is devoted to a piece of doctrine – a doctrine which took the Early Church something like four centuries to figure out. Most of that process was rooted in trying to figure out what God had done through, and in, Jesus. As in, was Jesus a part of God, or was he merely a human who was LIKE God (which comes down to a single letter in Greek)? And if he's both fully God and fully human, with both natures held in the same container, are those two natures mixed up in any way, or are they separated from one another somehow?

Yeah. It's confusing – and understandably so. Here's the thing: If there is one God, how can God in fact be *three*, as the doctrine of the Trinity describes? It states, clearly, that God can be fully understood as a single entity, made up of three separate yet co-equal Persons which manifest in their own unique ways (and even to use the word "manifest" doesn't quite have it right!). We still struggle to make sense out of it even now, despite the hundreds of linear feet of library shelf space which have been devoted to it. That should tell you something not just about how difficult it was to get to that point, but also how difficult it continues to be for most people to wrap their heads around. I don't know about you, but it makes me wonder if those 2000 years that people have spent struggling to understand God as fully as possible are more about the limits of human knowing than they are about anything else.

One thing I hope you have noticed as you've followed along with the lessons this morning is that none of them expressly discusses this tricky piece of theology. They're far more concerned with how God made the world and saw that it was good, and with going out into the world to tell everyone about it than they are about so-called correct ways of explaining who God is. To read the Trinity back into them – that is, to insist that it's really what the writers were referring to, even centuries before the definition was settled - isn't exactly a helpful thing to do. The people who told the stories, and then edited them together, weren't thinking about God as "Three in One." What they were trying to communicate is that God is God; that God made the world; and then God made humanity in God's image and declared it good. That's it.

Even when we get to the New Testament, there really isn't an instance where the Trinity is directly referred to as The Trinity. The end of Matthew is about as close as we get. There, the risen Jesus gives the disciples the commandment to go and baptize "all nations" in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. However, Matthew isn't talking about the Trinity, per se. He's quoting the formula required for baptisms. It was already in use in his community by the time he published his gospel in the late 70s or early 80s. We've continued to use the very same one ever since because, as Matthew recorded it, Jesus told us to do so.

The doctrine of the Trinity is really about squaring lived experience of God with what the Bible tells us about who God is. As homiletics professor Tom Long notes, such doctrines doesn't necessarily spring forth from the ivy-covered halls of the academic world. Rather, they are, "...like [a] river [bridge] built by armies... assembled on the fly in seasons of need and... crafted in the field to bear the weight of people marching on a

mission.”¹ The Trinity itself is exactly that, as a product of the crucible that was the lived experience of early Christians. They were hard pressed to come up with the language to explain why they claimed they were gathered into community, and into the very life of God, and why that in turn meant they were willing to do things like caring for the poor and oppressed, and enduring persecution. The earliest planks in that field bridge, as Matthew presents them, don’t have anything to do with the precise relationships among the three Persons inside the Godhead. Instead, he’s trying to cross the swamp of how to get Jesus’ bewildered followers to go down from the mountain in Galilee, and out into the world to share what he taught them.²

In other words: You can’t stay here. You have to go somewhere, and do something, else.

The idea that we can’t stay in one place for very long permeates all of Scripture. If we read enough of it, we’ll get the impression that God’s people are always a people on the move. Nobody seems to stay in one place for very long. Abraham is told to pack up his family and his herds and go to the land which God would show him; Moses led the Israelites for 40 years as they wandered around the desert; and even Jesus himself never stayed in one place for very long, walking all over Galilee in the course of his relatively short career. They’re all going *somewhere*, because God called them away from the safety and security of their own homes, and then asked them to show the world there was something far bigger and far better than themselves in the regions beyond.

¹ Thomas G. Long, “Homiletical Perspective: Matthew 28:16-20.” In *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season after Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16)*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 45-49.

² Ibid.

That something bigger and better is the self-annihilating love of God, and the mystery of how everyone has become able to share in the promise embodied in Christ Jesus. As bearers of this message, the disciples – and us as their heirs - had no choice but to follow this commandment to go, and do likewise.

That's exactly what "mission" is: Going and doing what Jesus taught us. It is not about explaining "correct" theological and doctrinal commitments, or even about trying to convert someone to our point of view. It's about telling, and showing, that God loves the good world that God made so much that God will draw us into relationship in any way possible, and will never let us go.

This is all we really need to be able to explain to others what the Trinity is: it is a way for us to begin to understand who God is and how God works in the world. A completely intellectual explanation of the divine economy – that is, of all the relationships at the center of God's being – is not at all necessary. It may not even be helpful. What's more, it's an impossible task. At the end of his treatise *On the Trinity*, Augustine of Hippo reminds his readers that it may well be beyond our capacity to know fully, because even the best metaphors fail to capture it completely. That failure is more than OK. As Jesus reminds the disciples in his final lecture in John's Gospel, we cannot bear all of this knowledge now, though in time, we will be guided into it.

While "head" knowledge is not at all a bad thing when it comes to something as intricate as the nature of God, it misses something when it tries to tackle the issue on its own. For one, it's just too big. For two, it speaks to us on such a visceral level that to say we understand it only as some kind of artificial construct leaves more than just a little bit missing. Faith is THE thing which can fill in those holes. It allows us to

experience the wonderful complexity of this unique relationship, to be drawn into it ourselves as full participants, and to reflect them in our relationships with one another. As Barbara Brown Taylor notes, "While it may seem more respectable to approach faith as an intellectual exercise or more satisfying to approach it as an emotional one, our relationship to God is not simply a matter of what we think or how we feel. It is more comprehensive than that, and more profound. It is a full-bodied relationship in which mind and heart, spirit and flesh, are converted to a new way of experiencing and responding to the world. It is a matter of learning to see the world, each other, and ourselves as God sees us, and to live as if God's reality were the only one that mattered."³

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*. Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1993.