

The Triune God | Trinity Sunday C (June 15, 2025) | Psalm 8 (Robert Alter), Romans 5:1-5 (NRSV)

Church, I'm in a bit of a pickle this morning. See, one of my primary beliefs is that our faith is meant to make a difference. That is, I really think it's true that anything worth believing in should make an impact on our lives. Right? If we dare use a term like "God," what we're talking about should affect our walk, not just our talk, ya know?

And usually that works out just fine. Especially here where folks are always giving of their time, talent, and treasures in meaningful ways. Truly, from a relative newcomer's perspective, Church, I want you to know that. This church, collectively and individually through so many of its members, has never failed to impress. We always rise to the occasion.

But, at any rate, like I said, today I'm in a pickle because for the longest time I saw the doctrine of the Trinity as just an intellectual exercise. Like, it's in the Bible. I trust in it. Right here in Romans, it mentions the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit working in tandem to accomplish God's will. So, there you go. It's true. But, again, what's that do for us? How's that actually change our lives?

You would think that the revealed nature of God in scripture, one of the deepest distinctions between Christianity and any other religion out there, and really just the way we understand who and what God even is as Christians; you would figure that'd be life changing. But like I said, for a couple of years, even after studying it in depth in seminary and preaching and teaching on it and all that, for me the doctrine of the Trinity really just felt like a weird intellectual exercise with no real actionable point.

And to be really honest with you all, I do think that's more or less how it all started. Like, really, the doctrine of the Trinity got hammered not exactly in scripture, but in later theological debates during ancient church councils.

And real quick, I need to be careful with how I say all this. Because what I'm not saying is that the Trinity isn't found in scripture. After all, again, we have Romans 5 as an example just right here in front of us. But what I am saying is that the doctrine of the Trinity was not neatly laid out in Scripture. That came later. In fact, even just the word "Trinity" came later.

Y'all see the tight rope? The Bible doesn't say Trinity exactly but it does talk about God in a way where the Trinity is clearly what it's describing.

See, what I think it is, is that when the Bible talks about the Trinity, it really is talking about our Triune God in action. As in, when the Bible talks about how God can be mysterious but Jesus Christ is his perfect and reliable blueprint. The Bible talks about the Holy Spirit growing us in Christlikeness, in faith, hope, and love, that sort of thing.

But it really wasn't until the council of Nicaea when theologians had to first articulate how that all works in general. Like, how does the Father relate to the Son and how in turn does He relate to the Holy Spirit? Not just in sending his Son. We got that part. Not just the gift of the Holy Spirit. See, the council was assigned the task of just figuring out how our Triune God exists in and of Godself in eternity.

And believe it or not, that's kinda a tricky one! Because there's really these two different massive truths communicated in the Bible about exactly that. But at first glance, they seem to contradict each other.

Here's what I mean:

So, first, we all know that the Bible tells us there is one God. Other gods are idols, false, vain, something else, I don't know. But there's one God. While there are a few places that leave it ambiguous, overall the Bible is not ambiguous on that subject.

But, at the same time, second, the Bible tells us God the Father is fully God. And so is Jesus. And so is the Holy Spirit.

Well, so we would then say “oh so it's just one God showing up in three ways like ice, water, and steam.” But that's wrong. That was actually condemned as the heresy of modalism. After all, if you say that, then all the parts of the Gospels where Jesus is talking to or about God or the Holy Spirit would just be him talking about himself. And that's not right.

So we might adjust and say “oh ok, so not one God in three forms but more like three parts of God, three independent but together parts of who God is. Kinda like a three leaf clover or three blades of wind in a tornado.” But don't you know that's the ancient heresy of partialism! We did it again, Church. Because, see, if you said that, then you could say you can get God without Jesus or the Spirit without God or any number of whacky things like that.

So, we try again and say “ok so it's three different gods but they're basically on the same team.” Well, that's called tri-theism otherwise called polytheism and it was explicitly condemned at the Third Council of Constantinople in 681.

One more then we'll move on... we might then say that it's one God with the Father kinda like the brains and the Son and the Spirit kinda like His two hands in creation but wouldn't you know the ancient church even covered that one. That one's called monarchianism. Confirmed to be heretical.

See, real quick, we need to know that in the ancient church, when something was labeled a heresy, it wasn't received exactly the same way we think of it now. Today we tend to color all that with witch trials and burning people at the stake but that happened about 1000 years later and this just wasn't that. Mostly this was a bunch of nerdy pastors in good faith trying to get to the bottom of how to describe God.

But with that said, just about every single theologian who has ever tried to describe the Trinity has been at least called a heretic if not condemned outright (with the exception of Athanasius who wrote the gold standard by which we establish what a heretical view on the Trinity even is, of course).

But really and truly, Church, what I'm trying to tell you is that I went to seminary only really knowing that the Trinity meant we believe in one God in three Persons, the specifics of which are a Divine mystery. And then after much reading and deliberation, I left not even knowing that much. Just 1000 ways to be wrong on the matter and the best answer we actually have is “it's a mystery.”

But don't feel too bad for me now. See, Church, in the midst of all these theologians getting condemned as heretics, I did find something. See, they established something as orthodox that really blew my mind and changed my life in a way. In fact, it was figuring this out that led me to the theology of Karl Barth which I think had something to do with me coming here.

See, what it was, was that at the first council of Nicaea in 325, really the first church council meeting at all and the meeting in which they established the whole Nicæan Creed, they made clear that Jesus Christ and God the Father were ultimately of the same substance.

They were responding explicitly to what is now known as the heresy of Arianism or the belief that Christ was a created being different from the Father and also just sorta generally rejecting something called Gnosticism that had mostly died out a century beforehand anyway. And I know this is nerdy but it just was an absolute power move by the council!

See, they really only needed this one Greek turned Latin word “Homousion” and it shattered the whole argument against them. See Homousion translates as “exact same in being, exact same in essence.” Or, in other words, minus a robe and some sandals, God looks exactly like Jesus and Jesus looks exactly like God.

And I'll spare you a lot of the theology nerd cross talk there but the bottom line with that is it changed how I understood the Trinity. It actually told me that the way we all too often think Christianity works, the way we all too often think God works, is not actually what the Bible is trying to talk to us about at all. It's not what historic Christianity teaches.

Let me illustrate it with Romans 5 here, specifically verses one and two. See Paul has just wrapped up the first big leg of his argument in Romans 1-4, establishing that we are indeed justified by faith so he says, starting in verse 1;

“Therefore, since we are justified by faith” and then he talks to us about the benefits. He says “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.”

Now, the Greek for peace here, it's not talking about good vibes and dispositions, it is talking about war versus peace. It's talking about two natures that just aren't the same. What the theologian and philosopher Søren Kierkegaard described as the infinite qualitative distinction between God and man.

But what I used to sorta think was that this war was God being super mad at us to the point that God sent Jesus down to earth mostly to kill him as a proper punishment for our sins. I thought that's how it worked. I thought that's where the grace came from. And so, then I thought that's what the Holy Spirit pouring out love was. It was the part where God doesn't smite me now because He already smited Jesus.

But, knowing this word Homousion, this idea that God the Father and Christ the Son are of one being, one essence; we see that doesn't really make any sense. Like, I want to be clear, there is some sacrificial atonement theology in the Bible but it's sorta been blown out of proportion and it just too often imputes the character of God. Like, it's this idea that God the Father is so angry and wrathful and Christ the Son is so weak and docile;

that just isn't it. And in fact it's just a really poor understanding of all of God the Father's grace throughout the Old Testament and all of Jesus', let's call it, righteousness expressed loudly throughout the New Testament.

See, instead, the way we must read these verses if we're taking seriously the character of God the Father and Christ the Son, and if the Nicæan Creed is anything to go by, the way we would have to read it is like this:

There is a God out there whose ways are not our ways. And that's good news because God's ways are unbelievably graceful, merciful, and loving. In fact, so much so, that even while our nature as humans and God's nature as God could best be described as at war with one another, God has instead chosen to send an ambassador to us. And this was a costly move. Because the ambassador was not looking for a transaction or a quid pro quo. Instead, wouldn't you know it, He looked exactly like God. He was extremely gracious, merciful, and loving.

And so, this God, in love, took on flesh and walked with us so that God might really and truly know us. And He walked with us even through death, death on a cross. So there's no one who can say they're beyond reach. And what's more, God then sent the Holy Spirit to intimately bind Himself with our soul that God would be near to each of us as we each grow to someday glorify God in how we, too, overflow with grace, mercy, and love.

Do you see that? When you really dig into the weeds of the doctrine of the Trinity, you see something that's kinda so plain that I find it profound. See, it's telling us there is a God who looks exactly like Jesus, then there's Jesus, then there's the Spirit who is gracefully guiding us to look more like Jesus.

Not a God who is at war with you, a God who is sending his ambassador to you to formally establish peace talks and a personal coach too, whose gonna grow you a bit more every day. Simply because God loves you, all this is happening. That's the Good News, y'all.

The good news today is that God in all of who God is, is this communion of love. And what's more, this is the God who mercifully invites us to be merciful. Who gracefully grows us in grace. Who lovingly fills our hearts so that we could join in the mission of giving that love out to the world.

Let's pray, using Psalm 8 as a guide.

LORD, our Master, how majestic Your name in all the earth!
Whose splendor was told over the heavens.
From the mouth of babes and sucklings
You founded strength on account of Your foes
to put an end to enemy and avenger.

When we see Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars You fixed firm,

“What is man that You should note us,
and the human creature, that You pay us heed,
and You make us little less than the gods,
with glory and grandeur You crown us?
You make us to rule over the work of Your hands.

All things You set under our feet.
Sheep and oxen all together,
and also the beasts of the field,
birds of the heavens and fish of the sea,
what moves on the paths of the seas.”

LORD, our Master, how majestic Your name in all the earth!