

Trinity Sunday
Sunday, June 11, 2017
Beyond the Tomb ~ Experiencing the Trinity
John 15:26-16:16

I need to admit something to you—it's true confession time. For the 16 years that I was at St. John's, this is a Sunday where I would either ask one of my honorary assistants to preach or I'd ensure that I was midway through a sermon series. Why? Because as I said in my opening remarks, today is Trinity Sunday. And even though we are "trained professionals" the Trinity is one of the most difficult topics for clergy to preach on because it's one of the most difficult doctrines to understand. (P) The word 'trinity' means 'a group of three closely related people or things; a triad; the state of being three-fold or triple.' Trinity is a theological term applied to God to indicate His eternal existence as three distinct Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who nevertheless remain one indivisible God. The early church Father, Tertullian, writing in the 2nd century, was the first to use the word 'trinity' in an effort to summarize a great amount of Biblical truth about God. Almost 200 years later, Augustine of Hippo, a bishop in North Africa, took nearly 30 years to write his 15 volume work entitled "About the Trinity." (P) As the story goes, one day, as Augustine was struggling to understand the nature of the Trinity, he decided go for a walk on the beach, where he saw a small boy digging a hole in the sand with a seashell. The boy then ran to the ocean, filling the shell with water, and rushed back to pour it into the hole. Augustine watched as the boy repeated this over and over again. Finally, he asked; "What are you doing, my little man?" "I'm trying to put the ocean into this hole," the boy replied. Augustine suddenly had an 'ah ha' moment! He suddenly realized that this was precisely what he was trying to do—fit the great mysteries of God into his little brain. (P) Throughout

the centuries, theologians like Augustine, have wracked their brains trying to formulate a doctrinally sound, fully satisfying illustration of the Trinity. However, unlike us, God is omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent—He is all-knowing, all-present, and all-powerful—and there’s no way that we can fully comprehend all there is to know about Him. As we read in Isaiah 55:8-9; “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (P) Despite this reality, there have been several analogies drawn from the realms of nature and mathematics to help explain the unexplainable. One popular analogy is an egg which consists of a shell, a yolk, and an egg white. The three parts creating a unified whole. The shortfall of this illustration is that God can’t be divided into parts. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are one in essence, but the same can’t be said for the shell, yolk, and white of an egg, which can be separated. (P) A similar illustration uses the apple: the skin, flesh, and seeds all comprise the apple, just as the Father, Son, and Spirit all comprise God. This illustration has the same weakness as the egg, namely the parts of the apple, considered independently, are not the apple. By contrast, each Person of the Trinity, taken independently, is still God. (P) Another illustration is said to have originated with St. Patrick who explained the concept of the Trinity by using a shamrock, a member of the clover family with three small leaves on a single stem. The three individual leaves are still one plant, just as the three Persons of the Trinity are one God. The shamrock analogy is perhaps better than the egg and apple analogies, although it shares the weakness of possibly dividing God into parts. (P) Another common illustration of the Trinity involves the different states of matter—solid, liquid, and gas. The illustration typically uses water as the example: water exists as a solid (ice), a

liquid, and a gas (vapour). No matter what physical state water is in, it's still water—its chemical composition remains the same—it's H₂O—whether it's floating unseen in the atmosphere to create humidity, floating in chunks in your tea or filling your glass to help relieve the humidity. The problem with this illustration is that liquid water, when it freezes, switches from liquid to solid, and, when it boils, it switches to vapour. However, God doesn't switch states or modes. Liquid water can become solid or gas, but God the Father never becomes the Son or the Spirit. (P) In fact, the idea that God manifests Himself differently at different times (like water manifests itself variously as solid, liquid, or gas) is a heresy or false teaching called modalism, and is definitely to be avoided. (P) Although these and other analogies may provide some insight, there's no way, with our limited minds and understanding, for us to comprehend the fullness of God's triune nature. However, that doesn't mean we shouldn't try. The doctrine of the Trinity is central to our faith—it's how we encounter God in our everyday lives and live in relationship with Him. And just like the disciples' encounter with the risen Jesus changed and transformed their lives, our encounter with God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit can change and transform us. And so this morning, I want to conclude our series Beyond the Tomb (I know I said last week was the conclusion!) by looking at the doctrine of the Trinity—what it means and why it matters.

One of the best places to start when we're thinking about the Trinity is the historic creeds of the church. The dictionary defines 'creed' as 'a system, doctrine, or formula of religious beliefs or opinions; a formal statement of beliefs, principles, or aims that guides someone's actions. It comes from the Latin word 'credo,' which means; 'to believe, trust in, rely on; to confide, commit, consign, suppose, entrust.' (P) Creeds are often written to combat heresy or false teaching and to clarify belief. Indeed, the three historic creeds of

Christianity were hammered out on the anvil of controversy and forged in the crucible of debates, as great minds wrestled with how to confess the Triune God of Scripture faithfully and fully. (P) One of the first creeds written was the Apostles' Creed, which dates as far back at 140 AD and is first found in its present form in 390. Written to combat the Gnostic heresy that denied the humanity of Jesus, the Apostle's Creed falls into three sections concerned with God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, corresponding to the three baptismal questions of the early Church. (P) The Nicene Creed, was written in 355 AD and revised in 381 at the Councils of Nicea to combat the Arian heresy which sought to downplay the divinity of Jesus and taught that Christ was a subordinate entity to God the Father. It formalized the central belief of our faith that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. (P) The last of the three ecumenical creeds, the Athanasian Creed, is not as well known. Written between 450 and 670 AD, it's the first creed in which the equality of the three persons of the Trinity is explicitly stated. It's rather long—44 lines—but begins by stating; "We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; Neither confounding the Persons; nor dividing the Essence. For there is one Person of the Father; another of the Son; and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one; the Glory equal, the Majesty coeternal." (P) The doctrine of the Trinity is also found in the 39 Articles, written in 1571, which provides the theological framework for Anglicanism. Article 1: Of Faith in the Holy Trinity reads; "There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body, parts, or passions; of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the Maker, and Preserver of all things both visible and invisible. And in unity of this Godhead there be three Persons, of one substance, power, and eternity; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost." (P) All of these creeds and theological statements were

written to confront specific heresies and false teachings of the day and to help believers better understand the Christian faith. Although the word 'trinity' is not found in the Bible, nor is the doctrine of the Trinity specifically spelled out, they are assumed and taught in both the Old and New Testaments. We see this clearly in our reading this morning from the gospel of John, where Jesus is talking about the Spirit of God who goes out from the Father and testifies about the Son. (P) However, this isn't the only place in the Bible where the Trinity is referred to.

Before I look at what the Trinity is, I want to look at what the Trinity is not. (P) #1. The Trinity is not three different gods. Sometimes in our limited understanding, we think of the Trinity as 3 God's who get along really well and never argue or disagree. However, unlike other faiths, Christianity is monotheistic, which means one God. Believing in 3 gods would be tri-theism or polytheism. The Trinity is not 3 Gods, but one God in three persons—which is clearly supported by Scripture. Consider these verses: Deuteronomy 6:4; "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. (P) Deuteronomy 32:39; "...there is no god beside me." Psalm 86:10; "...you are god alone." And Romans 3:30: "...there is only one God..." (P) A belief in the Trinity is not a belief in 3 gods, but one God in three different persons. #2. The Trinity is not 3 manifestations of God. Again, this is modalism that says there is one God who appeared as Father, then as the Son, and now as the Spirit. Biblically, we can see the error of this belief at Jesus' baptism—Matthew 3:16-17 reads; "As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.'" (P) Notice that all three members of the Trinity are present at the same time. #3. The Trinity

is not one big God and two lesser gods. Speaking about the Son, John writes in John 1:1; “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” John is clear that before His incarnation—before His birth in Bethlehem—Jesus existed in eternity with God as the Word. Similarly, Scripture also teaches about the pre-existence of the Holy Spirit. Genesis 1:1-2 reads; “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters...” (P) According to Genesis, the Holy Spirit was present at creation, hovering over the waters, and not created. God the Father isn't the “main God” and the Son and Spirit inferior gods. The Father is clearly God. Jesus is clearly God. The Spirit is clearly God. (P) If that's what the Trinity is not, what does Scripture say the Trinity is?

The doctrine of the Trinity is attempt to answer two very important theological questions: What is God? And Who is God? The word ‘triune,’ is a combination of the words ‘tri,’ and ‘unity,’ and literally points to the tri-unity between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Within the Godhead there are 3 persons who are neither three Gods nor three parts of God, but coequally and coeternally God. This isn't some new teaching, but can be seen throughout Scripture, starting right at the beginning. Genesis 1:26 reads; “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness...’” (P) Notice the use of the plural “us” and “our.” That is not a translation error—the plural is also present in the original Hebrew. We can only assume that the use of the plural here refers to the three separate persons of the Godhead. Later in Genesis 18 we're told that three mysterious strangers visited Abraham by the Oaks of Mamre. What's interesting about this verse is that it speaks of God as one and three at the same time; “And the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he

sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth and said, ‘O Lord, if I have found favour in your sight, do not pass by your servant.’” (P) This story is often used as proof of the existence of the Trinity in the OT. (P) God as Trinity can also be seen in the NT. As I’ve already said, all three persons of the Trinity were present at Jesus’ baptism by John; Jesus refers to the Trinity in His teachings in John 15-17; and the writing of Paul are filled with Trinitarian references. (P) What is God? Scripture is clear: God is One—the ultimate reality of perfect power, love, and goodness. Who is God? God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—in His expression of that power, love, and goodness.

All of this, however, begs the question: So what? Why is this important? Why does the doctrine of the Trinity matter? (P) First and foremost, the Trinity matters because it helps us to understand the true nature of God, as revealed in Scripture. It’s also important because without the Trinity we can lose sight of the story of redemption and the gradual revelation of God to humanity. (P) Consider the 3 persons of the Trinity. #1. God the Father. We often think the role of the first person of the Trinity as being the Creator, the Ruler of all. While God is these things, the first person of the Trinity has chosen to reveal Himself primarily as Father. Jesus continually refers to Him as Father and prayer is directed to Him as Father. Therefore, as God reveals Himself primarily as Father, He does everything as a father. He creates as Father. He rules as Father. He judges and disciplines as a Father, and He loves as a Father. (P) Unfortunately, there are some people who didn’t have the best relationship with their earthly father, and as a result, can project that onto their heavenly Father. While I understand this, that’s not the way we should do it. It’s our

heavenly Father who defines fatherhood and it's His example we should be following. (P) If God portrays Himself as a father, then that means there must be a child whom He loves. (P) This brings us to the second person of the Trinity—the Son. This must be an eternal Son because if there was ever a time in eternity past when the Son didn't exist, then the Father couldn't have been a Father because there would have been a time that He wasn't loving His Son. (P) Have you ever wondered what was going on in eternity past—and by that, I mean before the creation of the universe? On the night He was arrested, Jesus prayed in John 17:24; "...you loved me before the creation of the world." (P) Before the creation of the world, there was love. Because God is Father, Son, and Spirit, He wasn't lonely—there's perfect fellowship, relationship, and love in the Trinity.(P) The Father loves the Son. This is what the Father has always been doing, loving the Son and giving to the son. John 3:35 reads; "The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands." (P) And John 5:20; "...the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does." (P) The Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father—in John 14:31 Jesus says; "The world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me." (P) This brings us to the third person of the Trinity—the Spirit. (P) The First Person of the Trinity, in His role as Father, loves the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son. And in His role as Son, the Second Person of the Trinity listens to and follows what the Father says because of His own love for the Father and because He knows and has known the Father's love throughout eternity. This love is experienced through the Third Person of the Trinity, the Spirit. At Jesus' baptism, when the Father proclaimed His love for the Son, Matthew tells us the Spirit of God descended on Jesus like a dove. This is how God loves us as well, through the giving of the Holy Spirit. Paul tells us in Romans 5:5 that "God has poured out

his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.” (P) Understanding God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit can change our experience of life as we grow in our knowledge of, and relationship with, Him. No longer will we view God as some distant, disinterested disciplinarian who wants our unquestioned obedience; or as a judge in the sky just waiting to nail us to the wall when we make a mistake. Instead we’ll experience Him as deeply personal and relational—the God who out of love created us; out of love redeemed us, and out of love sustains us every day. A God who will never leave us or forsake, but who is always with us—even to the end of the age—sharing our joys and sorrows. God didn’t need to create us—He wasn’t lonely up in heaven—but in perfect unity, love, and fellowship within Himself as Trinity. He created us as an outflow of His love. 1 John 1:4 puts it very simply; “God is love.” (P) When we have a proper understanding of God as Father, Son, and Spirit, we can better appreciate and understand His great love for us. God didn’t need us—He created us as an outpouring of His incredible love. In fact, everything He does is an outpouring of His love. When we begin to grasp this just a little, His word to us isn’t rules, it’s life. When we know His great love, it fills us with compassion toward those who don’t know it. When we experience His love through the outpouring of His Spirit in our lives, like, God, we want to share that love with others.

The doctrine of the Trinity isn’t just a teaching of the church that we learn about at confirmation and then file away in the back of our minds and dust off once a year on Trinity Sunday. Although the doctrine of the Trinity is central to our faith, at the end of the day, we don’t believe in a doctrine, we believe in a living, dynamic God, who has been revealed to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It’s faith in this God—and lives shaped by that faith—that make us who we are. We don’t have to understand the Trinity to believe it or experience

it. (P) God loves us and wants to be in relationship with us. He loves us so much that Jesus came to this earth to share His love even while we were sinning against Him. He loves us so much He gave us the gift of the Holy Spirit to empower us and be with us always. (P) Do you know this love? Have you experienced God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in your life? I want to end this morning by singing Holy, Holy, Holy the great hymn to the Trinity. Let this hymn be our prayer of invitation. As we sing it, I encourage you to invite God the Father, by His Spirit, to fill you with a deeper awareness of Jesus' presence and His great love for you. (Read)

“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us.”