

This is our third week in a seven-week series on the Trinity, where we're exploring what it means for us that the one true God is Triune: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thomas Aquinas wrote, "The purpose and fruit of our whole life is the knowledge of the Trinity in unity." In some sense this is the most basic it gets; we're just talking about *who God is*. But because God is infinite and eternal, because we'll *never* exhaust the knowledge of who he is, it's constantly captivating and helpful to apply that knowledge to life. The more you get to know him, the more it changes the way you think about *everything*.

We started a few weeks ago with an exhortation from John's first epistle to "Abide in the Trinity," to dwell, relationally, in the Trinity for our eternal life. Last week we looked at "The Trinity and Salvation" from Ephesians 1:3-14, how it is that the triune God reveals himself to us and saves us for a relationship with himself; the Father chose us and loved us, and sent his Son who incarnated for us, became a man for us in order to redeem us, and the Holy Spirit applies this salvation to us by uniting us to the Son.

This week we're looking at "The Trinity and the Church." One of the chief effects of our salvation, of coming to know the triune God in union with him in Christ, is being born again in his image, or being re-cast in his image. We were originally created in his image. God being Persons in Communion—God *being* love—this means we were created for relationships of love and unity and joy. In our rebellion against God, that image was distorted and became *self-love*, but now, as a result of our salvation, God's image is being restored in us. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is the exact image of the invisible God, and we are being renewed in his image, in the image of the one who showed the world what it really means that God is love. And *the* place on earth where this image is primarily displayed is the Church.

**<sup>11</sup> Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—<sup>12</sup> remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. <sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup> For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility <sup>15</sup> by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, <sup>16</sup> and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. <sup>17</sup> And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. <sup>18</sup> For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. <sup>19</sup> So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup> built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, <sup>21</sup> in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. <sup>22</sup> In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. (Ephesians 2:11-22)**

Ephesians is a book about cosmic reconciliation, unity, and love... *all things are being summed up in Christ* (1:10). The whole world was fractured and fragmented because of our sin, and one day, when Jesus returns, he's going to fix everything. The Son of God who became a man—Jesus—will make everything whole again. *Until then*, the one place where this re-integration, re-unification, redemption takes place on earth is in the fellowship of the Church.

The Church is the trophy of God's grace, a testimony to the Gospel. The Church is the "firstfruits" of the resurrection, the restored life, the new world. The Church is a foretaste of what is to come, when God fills all things. Or, at least, it's *suspected* to be.

Perhaps more frequently we know the Church as place of conflict, where our tendency is to *exclude* each other, rather than include. Everybody knows the illustration of the lifeboat, where disagreement gets people kicked out, until there's only one person left. Or the one about the guy who gets rescued after being stranded alone on a desert island, and his rescuers ask him about the three structures he built. "That one's my house... that's where I go to church..." They ask, "What's the other building?" He says, "That's where I *used* to go to church."

Those are funny illustrations that make a very serious point; ultimately, we're the kind of people who find things to disagree about, and we take those things so seriously that they create rifts between us. We *define* ourselves by the things that distinguish us... because that's what self-centered beings do! I would lose my superiority, I would lose my "rightful place" at the center of everything, I would lose my very identity as an individual if I didn't emphasize what it is that sets me apart from others.

In the New Testament Church, the big dividing line was ethno-religious, Jew versus Gentile. "*We're the special people of God... if you want to have God, then you have to become one of us.*" ("And if you *do* become like us, we might *tolerate* you, but we won't treat you as one of us, because you're really not.") ("And, even though we're supposed to share the Gospel with you, we really don't want to, because then we'll kinda lose our special status.") So, even though God explicitly told Israel that his Temple would be a house of prayer *for all nations*, they gave the Gentiles who visited the cold shoulder. They set up the dividing wall between the outer Court of the Gentiles and the inner courts, where only Jews could go, and the inscription on the wall read: "Whoever is arrested will himself be responsible for his death, which will follow." Pretty friendly statement.

Now, this attitude among first century Jews is pretty complex, and is at least partially based on God's Law itself (which we can't get into now), but we *know* it was largely influenced by a sense of superiority, a tendency toward exclusivity, because of what happened when Jesus went to the Temple. He found the Court of the Gentiles crowded with merchants who made it impossible for the nations to draw near to God for worship. And Jesus got angry. He drove out the merchants and cleared the way for the aliens and strangers to be brought near to God. There was man-made division between the Jews and Gentiles, and he was there to bring the whole world to God.

Our text tells us that the episode in the Temple was just a shadow, just a hint of what he would accomplish at the Cross.

**<sup>12</sup> Remember... you were separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth (citizenship) of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. <sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.**

That is to say that Gentiles—like you and me— who were *not* part of the special community of God have been *made* part of that community, *brought near to God... in Christ Jesus*, by his blood. That is the Gospel of the Trinity! We are in the Spirit-anointed Son, so have come near to the Father. And here's what that means for the *Church*...

**<sup>14</sup> Christ himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.**

All those who trust in Christ for salvation are *in Christ... together*. By faith, Jews *and* Gentiles are *in* the Son of God together and equally. That's saying much more than just something like, "We're in the same club together," or "We're on the same team." There is a certain level of camaraderie that comes with those associations, but Paul is talking on the level of divine love, which we can't fathom. (He prays in the next chapter that we'd be able to understand the love of Christ that *surpasses knowledge!*)

Jesus prayed this way in John 17...

**<sup>20</sup> "I do not ask for these [the twelve disciples] only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word [the Church], <sup>21</sup> that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. <sup>22</sup> The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, <sup>23</sup> I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one..."**

This is the deep end of the pool. Jesus tells us that the Father is *in* the Son, and the Son is *in* the Father. And this is where the “oneness” of God and the “threeness” of God meet. The holy Trinity is one God in three Persons who *mutually indwell* One Another (perichoretic union). The Father so gives himself to the Son through his Spirit that he is *in* him. And the Son so gives himself to the Father through his Spirit that he is *in* him. Each of the three Persons of the Trinity are in Each Other in such a way that *expresses* who God is, and *realizes* who God is. God is *one because* the three Persons indwell Each Other, and the three Persons indwell Each Other *because* God is one. And the three Persons mutually indwelling each other is what defines Each Person—the Son is the Son because the Father is *in* him, and so on. Each Person receives his distinct identity from relationship with the Others. This is *ultimate intimacy* (which comes from the Latin for *inmost*). This is *love*. This is mind-boggling, but it’s a glimpse into why John says, “God *is* love,” because the Father is *in* the Son, and the Son is *in* the Father.

*And this union is shared with the Church.*

***“that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us... that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one...”***

God’s own loving unity isn’t just something we reflect because we *imitate* him. We reflect God’s loving unity because we *participate* in it, because it’s our spiritual and eternal reality. And we share this unity with each other, no matter who we are, *in Christ*.

**<sup>15</sup> [The Son created] in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, <sup>16</sup> [reconciling] us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.**

That applies not just to the ancient hostility between Jews and Gentiles, but to all our modern hostilities as well. For example, we frequently define ourselves by, we *find our identity in* our politics. Republicans look with disdain upon democrats, and vice versa. And libertarians pity them both! Or we define ourselves by our race, and harbor hatred or suspicion toward those whose skin is different, whose language is different. Or we define ourselves by gender... or by economics... or by neighborhood... or by nation... or by cultural preferences... or by education... or by religious practices. We define ourselves, we set ourselves apart by who we are *in ourselves*, over and against others. And so relationships disintegrate.

But, in God, a Person’s identity is who he is in relation to Others. The Son is the Son because the Father is *in* him. And we, being *in Christ*, being *in* the Son, find our identity *in him*. And that is an identity in love, in community with each other.

**<sup>18</sup> For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.**

The Spirit unites us *all in Christ*, and so we have access to the Father *in unity*, together. We’re all members of one another in Christ. Whatever was the self-inflicted cause of our exclusivity before, whatever we used to define ourselves before, has been done away with as our identity. And our true identity is as those who have been united in Christ.

Maybe you’re afraid that becoming a Christian means *losing* your identity, but that’s not what we’re saying. Your identity as an individual doesn’t dissolve away into the ether of “oneness,” you aren’t assimilated into the collective. Your identity *resolves* and *is established* in your relationship to God and to others. In Christ, you become who you were always meant to be, who God intended you to be—not a solitary, autonomous, lonely individual, but a person in love, in God, in a family. James Torrance said, “God is in the business of creating community.” This is true because God *is* a Community, and he has made us in his image. Timothy Keller said, “If this world was made by a triune God, relationships of love are what life is really all about.”

**<sup>19</sup> So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup> built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, <sup>21</sup> in whom the whole structure (house), being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. <sup>22</sup> In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.**

In Christ, the Spirit-anointed Son of God, you are being built *together* as a holy temple, a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

**<sup>16</sup> Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? <sup>17</sup> ... God's temple is holy, and you are that temple. (1 Corinthians 3:16-17)**

This is all in the plural. You, *together*, are God's temple. This is in no way *individualistic* language. It's true that it applies individually to each of you, but only as you are *together, in Christ, for God, by the Spirit*. Because God is a Trinity his people reflect his image best as they dwell in him with love and joy, and he in them... *together*. We set aside all other things that would otherwise define us, and we are defined by being in him together. Our identity is as those who are in God together. And that's a beautiful thing to imagine, because God himself is beautiful!

**<sup>1</sup> How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts! <sup>2</sup> My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God... <sup>4</sup> Blessed are those who dwell in your house, ever singing your praise! <sup>5</sup> Blessed are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion... <sup>10</sup> For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. (Psalm 84)**

*We* are the dwelling place. *We* are the courts of the Lord, his temple. Origen said, "The church is full of the holy Trinity." The exalted language of Psalm 84 is about seeing God in the Church!

So, *community* is very important, because God is a Community, and we are in him, and we reflect him. People matter. People being together matters. People caring for other people is how we reflect God's image, because that's who God is—People caring for other People! Miroslav Volf said, "If the triune God is *unum multiplex in se ipso* (John Scotus Erigena), if unity and multiplicity are equiprimal in him, then God is the ground of both unity and multiplicity. Only 'unity in multiplicity' can claim to correspond to God... Only a communion of persons can correspond to the Trinity." That's the Church. The Church is the best reflection of God's image.

So we worship together, we listen to God together, we pray and praise together, we talk and play together, we serve together, we serve each other. Our *togetherness* in Christ is what displays the image of God in us, the image in which we were created, in which we're being renewed.

**<sup>1</sup> I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, <sup>2</sup> with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, <sup>3</sup> eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. <sup>4</sup> There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—<sup>5</sup> one Lord, one faith, one baptism, <sup>6</sup> one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:1-6)**