



“In God’s Image”

Genesis 1:26; Ephesians 4:1–6; 1 John 4:16b
(NRSV)

Uniquely, we proclaim to the world the Triune God

Suppose someone came up to you and asked you to tell them about God, to describe God to them. Where would you begin? With an adjective? A story perhaps? What words would sum up the essential characteristics of God? What would you most want them to know?

You might begin with the simple and very true statement, “God is great.” You would probably soon find yourself talking about God’s creation of the cosmos and his control of it. Or you might begin with “God is good” and launch into a discussion of good and evil, morality and ethics.

But if Jesus is the *full* revelation of God (and you are answering these God-questions as a Christian), then how does Jesus’ incarnation uniquely reveal to us God’s greatness or even his goodness? You probably don’t need the baby Jesus to know that God is great or to know that God is good, for there is ample evidence in the Hebrew Scriptures to show both of those statements are true.

So what is it that we know about God that we could not know without Jesus?

The apostle John takes us right to the heart of the matter with the simple statement, “God is love.” Note that he doesn’t say, “God loves.” A true statement but not unique to Christianity. John writes that God is love. That in God’s very being, God is love, God is inherently relational – three persons who love and are loved in a way and to a depth you and I cannot even imagine. This is no mere sentiment, like you might find on a blog or a bumper sticker – this is who God really is, revealed to us in the truth of Jesus. This is a statement about God that you could never know without the incarnation.

Jesus, fully human and fully divine, reveals to us that God is inherently relational, one God existing as three persons, each of whom is fully and completely God though none are all of God. The three -- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit -- are not simply three parts of a whole. Each *is* the whole though not all of it.

The word “Trinity” is composed of “tri” and “unity” – tri-unity. But some of the oneness is lost when we shrink it to “trinity.” It would be better if we used Tri-unity or spoke of the Triune God, for the best we can do is to proclaim that there is one and only one God, who exists in unity and oneness as three persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The doctrine of the Trinity expresses God’s “three-in-oneness.” But, really, how can this be – three and one? Why is this not just some sort of verbal mumbo-jumbo? How did the early Christians ever find their way to such a profound and mysterious affirmation about God?

The Living God – personal and triune

When Jesus was a very young boy, he would have been taught to recite the Shema, a Jewish prayer built on a verse from Deuteronomy: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord alone.” As a devout Jew, Jesus would have recited this prayer morning and evening. The Shema was akin to a battle cry of oppressed Israel, who had endured centuries of foreign domination. Despite this domination, the Jews of Jesus’ day remained fiercely monotheistic, making them unique in the ancient world.

Despite the pantheons of gods offered up by competing religions, the Jews insisted that there was one, and only one, God – YHWH -- who had created all that there is and had chosen Israel to be the means of creation’s renewal. For more than a decade after Jesus, all the believers in Jesus were Jews, just as Jesus was a Jew. As such, these early Christians remained fervent monotheists. But this soon posed a significant problem for them. Jesus said and did things that only God could say and do. Who was this Jesus? Could he possibly be God himself? But how could this be if there is only one God?

In the writings of the New Testament, we can see the first Christians coming to understand that God had revealed, through Jesus, his deeper nature. Namely, that while there is unity in God (yes, there is one God!) there is also community, fellowship, and love in God’s very being. In many ways, John’s gospel is written to convince readers that Jesus is fully God. From this beginning, Christians came to believe and proclaim that God is triune – one God, three persons¹.

Without question, for many Christians the whole notion of the Trinity is one of the most perplexing and seemingly irrelevant doctrines of the faith. Though we might affirm a statement something like this, “We believe in one God, who has always known himself as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,” it can be pretty hard for us to see how this makes much sense or how it matters to our lives as Christians. Yet, our belief in a personal, triune God is foundational to all that makes Christianity unique among the world’s major religions.

But if this is central to our faith, help me to understand. Three and one?

I’ve read many attempts to explain the nature of the Trinity in words. All fall short, some, far short. The egg yolk/egg white/eggshell and steam/water/ice analogies that we all heard in Sunday School are more harmful than helpful. The best analogy I’ve encountered is from Jeremy Begbie, a theologian at Duke Divinity School

¹ We use “persons,” but it too is misleading – causing us to see the threeness much more than the oneness that is God. Early theologians sometimes used “subsistence” rather than “person,” three “subsistences,” Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This seems to me like a theologian’s solution – not much help to the rest of us!

and a classically trained pianist. Begbie invites us to analogize God's three-in-oneness as three musical notes comprising a single chord – as on a piano.

A musical chord is a harmonic set of three or more notes that is heard as one. The most common is a triad, for example, the first, third, and fifth notes of a given musical scale. The chord of C major is composed of the notes C (the root of the chord), E (the third from the root), and G (the fifth from the root). Each individual note is 'a sound', and all three notes played together are likewise 'a sound'. Hence a chord is essentially three sounds in one sound, or one sound essentially composed of three different sounds (each of which has an individual identity as well as a corporate identity). Further, when you strike the "C" string on a piano and allow it to resonate, the "E" string and the "G" string resonate as well. Each note of the chord dwells in the other notes at all times. Moreover, when middle C (the root of the chord) is played it 'fills' the entire 'heard space'. When the E above middle C is played at the same time, that second note simultaneously 'fills' the whole of the 'heard space'; yet one can still hear both notes distinctly. When the G above middle C is added as well, a complete chord exists; one sound composed of three distinct sounds. Begbie writes:

What could be more apt than to speak of the Trinity as a three-note resonance of life, mutually indwelling, without mutual exclusion and yet without merger, each occupying the same 'space,' yet recognizably and irreducibly distinct, mutually enhancing and establishing each other? To speak of three strings mutually resonating instantly introduces a dynamism ... far truer to the Trinitarian, living God of the New Testament.

God is love

Thus, we proclaim that there is one God consisting of three persons who have always been, are now, and always shall be a loving community of three, the Trinity. This truth about God makes John's statement, "God is love," not mere sentiment, but a concrete statement of God's being.

God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit have always been, are now, and always will be in loving relationship with one another. God is love because God is inherently relational. The loving relationships among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit form the basis of God's very essence. The three persons of the Godhead live in eternal community, in a loving community of three persons. Indeed, it is from God's love that we learn the true meaning of love. As John writes: "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another" (1 John 3:16). The triune God is both lover and beloved in one God.

This is where John Wesley's personal theology and, hence, United Methodist beliefs begin: "God is love." In the lyrics of Charles Wesley, John's brother: "Love divine all loves excelling, joy of heaven, to earth come down." The Wesley brothers understood that it is love and grace that define God. Grace is simply love in action. The cross, the sacrifice and faithfulness it embodied, takes us to the heart, the essence, of God.

We too are relational . . . created for community

There is a fundamental truth about humankind here: we are created for community. The opening chapters of Genesis tell us that humans are made in God's image. We too are inherently relational; we are made to live in loving relationship with God and one another. It should surprise no one that Jesus reminded the scribe that loving God and neighbor are the two great commandments. We are created to love!

Frankly, it is a mistake to believe that the sole focus of our Christian life is to be our personal relationship with Jesus. Rather, our relationship with Jesus Christ is to be lived out in relationship with others. We are called not to isolation, but to fellowship and communion. We baptize our children into this community of God's people and we are responsible for doing all we can to build it up. Thus, a key test for any congregation, not just FUMC, is whether others see community in us. Are we inviting? Are we welcoming? Are we involved in the life of FUMC or do we just show up for church an hour each week (or every other week!)? This gets to the very heart of the Gospel and is why our joyful proclamation of a triune, relational God is such Good News to those who feel isolated and alone. Truly, there is nothing dry or "academic" about our doctrine of the Trinity.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Our proclamation of a triune God has always been fundamental to the Christian faith. Why might this be so? Why do some Christians find the whole thing pretty irrelevant? In today's study we saw how our commitment to community is strengthened by our belief in the Trinity. What are some other practical implications of this doctrine? How does it shape our understanding of God, ourselves, and our world? Why have Christians always held belief in the Trinity to be essential?
2. In the key scripture passage for this week, John writes that "God is love." Our belief in the Trinity – one God who has always existed in three persons – reveals that God is inherently relational, that God is inherently loving—that God is inherently a loving community of three persons. We, in turn, are created in God's image. What might this say about the nature of the loving relationships we have with others? To put it another way, when we embrace the image of God within ourselves, how does this affect the way we relate to others?