

# God in Three Persons, Blessed Trinity

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher  
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio  
May 30, 2021—Trinity Sunday

- Deuteronomy 6:4 New International Version <sup>4</sup> Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.
- John 14:26 Good News Translation [*Jesus said,*] <sup>26</sup> The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and make you remember all that I have told you.

I remember the first time I saw the movie “A Few Good Men.” It was on my first trip to Israel. At the end of a long day, our tour group arrived at our hotel overlooking the Sea of Galilee. As soon as we got to our room, my travel roommate had gone out like a light, but I wasn’t sleepy. So I turned on the TV and sat real close to the TV’s speaker with the sound barely audible so I wouldn’t disturb my roomie. Even viewing the screen from that distorted angle, it was a captivating story.

“A Few Good Men” is a 1992 military courtroom drama with powerful performances by many actors including Tom Cruise as defense attorney Lieutenant Kaffee and Jack Nicholson as Guantanamo base commander Colonel Jessep. In the climactic courtroom scene, Nicholson’s Colonel Jessep is on the witness stand. Col. Jessep sneers at the defense attorney and says “You want answers?”

Tom Cruise’s Lt. Kaffee responds, “I think I’m entitled.”

Jessep asks again, “You want answers??”

Kaffee comes right back, “I want the truth!”

Of course, Jessep’s iconic response is “You can’t handle the truth!” But our capacity to handle the truth is not my concern for today. Rather, today I’m more focused on our tendency to want answers.

When we gather for worship, when we listen to a sermon, I think most of us want “answers.” We want to come away understanding more about the story of the Bible and the character of God and our call to follow Jesus; we want to know more than we did when we tuned in/showed up. We want to grow in our knowledge. We hope to deepen our appreciation for God’s gracious gifts: life, love, purpose, belonging.

But today we’re going to spend a few moments together pondering something that I promise you we cannot fully understand. Not you. Not me. None of us.

At the end of the day... at the end of this message... at the end of this service, none of us can fully and satisfactorily explain the Holy Trinity of One God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And yet that’s the focus of this day.

This Sunday of the church year is called “Trinity Sunday.” “On Trinity Sunday we celebrate the mystery of God’s being as Holy Trinity.”<sup>1</sup>

The core of the biblical understanding of the Holy Trinity comes down to this:

1. There is only one God.
2. The Father is fully God, the Son (Jesus) is fully God and the Holy Spirit is fully God.
3. The Father is not the Son, and neither the Father nor the Son are the Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hoyt L. Hickman, et. al., Handbook of the Christian Year. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986, 236.

<sup>2</sup> <http://christiancadre.blogspot.com/2012/01/simple-illustration-of-trinity.html> accessed 5/24/2021

That, in a nutshell, is the teaching about the Holy Trinity.

We know that some of the world's ancient and present-day religions enshrine multiple gods—religions including Taoism, Shinto, and Hinduism, as well as the religions of ancient Greece and Rome.<sup>3</sup> Judaism, Christianity, and Islam were revolutionary in being monotheistic religions—believing in one sovereign God. But Christianity is unique among the monotheistic religions because we experience one God in three persons: God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. So, how can one be three, and how can three be one?

The Bible does not include the word Trinity. The New Testament does mention the persons of the Trinity without explicitly describing one God in Three Persons.

- The most familiar instance of this is placed on the lips of Jesus at the end of Matthew's gospel. You know that verse: when Jesus commissioned his disciples to "Go, then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples: baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit..." the Holy Trinity.<sup>4</sup>
- And a benediction penned by the apostle Paul certainly referenced a triune experience of the One True God when he wrote: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all..." again, the Holy Trinity.<sup>5</sup>

"Thus, the New Testament established the basis for the doctrine of the Trinity."<sup>6</sup>

The verse we heard from Deuteronomy was a common proclamation in synagogue worship: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord." Naturally, the Early Church didn't want to contradict the Hebrew scriptures affirmation of "one Lord." But the theologians of the Early Church saw the need to somehow explain how Christians experienced God also in the person of Jesus and in the power of the Spirit—one God in Three Persons

Through the centuries there have been numerous attempts to explain the concept of the Holy Trinity, some more helpful than others.

One popular story relates that Saint Patrick used a clover to teach the Irish about the triune nature of God. The clover has three leaves that branch off from one stem. He explained that just as the clover is one plant with three leaves, so too God is one God with three persons. However, one clover leaf on its own is not the full plant, whereas Scripture teaches that each of the persons of the Trinity is [in Himself] fully God. So the clover plant, while helpful as an illustration, is not an exact replica of God's triune nature.

Other popular illustrations of the Trinity along the same lines are an apple with its outer peel, inner flesh, and centralized seeds; or an egg with its shell, white, and yolk. These illustrations refer to one item, made up of three parts; but each part on its own does not constitute that item so these illustrations fall short, too....

Similarly, the sun has been used as an illustrative example of the Trinity because it gives off three different types of rays providing light, heat, and radiation. All these rays come from the same sun and without any of the three, the sun would cease to be the sun. However, light rays or radiation rays or heat

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/polytheism> accessed 5/25/2021

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 28:19 Today's English Version

<sup>5</sup> 2 Corinthians 13:13 Common English Bible

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Trinity-Christianity> accessed 5/25/2021

rays by themselves do not constitute the sun so this example falls short in the same way as the clover, egg, and apple.

The same is true for the example of the universe being made up of space, time, and matter because each element on its own is not the universe.

One illustration that avoids the... pitfall of the previous examples is the three states of matter of H<sub>2</sub>O. As a solid, H<sub>2</sub>O is ice; in liquid form, it's water; and in its gaseous state, H<sub>2</sub>O becomes steam. Regardless of the form in which it is found, the chemical makeup remains the same. However, the three-states-of-matter illustration falls short because ice, water, and steam cannot coexist in the same space and time. Father, Son, and Spirit do coexist and commune together. They also remain distinct whereas ice becomes water and water becomes steam and *vice versa*. But the Father never becomes the Son, nor does the Son turn into the Spirit...

Perhaps the least flawed illustration we have of God's triune nature is a musical chord of three notes. The three distinct notes work together to make one melodious sound, existing in the same time and space, and unified in purpose while remaining separate and distinct. Each note on its own fills the auditory space and creates a beautiful sound, and yet when combined with the other two notes... [remains] distinct from the other two. So this example comes close to showing how God's triune nature exists.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to descriptions attempting to explain the Holy Trinity, there have been attempts to represent it visually. The most familiar is a simple triangle whose sides represent the three persons of the Trinity. There are variations on this:

- Three overlapping circles creating a triangle where they all come together;
- A trefoil which is basically the outline of those three overlapping circles;
- A three-pronged *fleur-de-lis* suggesting the bloom of a lily;
- A triquetra formed by three interlocking arcs, also creating a central triangle.

One of the most beloved preachers of the early twentieth century was Harry Emerson Fosdick, described by Martin Luther King, Jr. as "the greatest preacher of this century."<sup>8</sup> In an attempt to help his people understand the majesty and mystery of God's triune nature, Fosdick pointed

to various portrayals of Theodore Roosevelt. His "Autobiography" portrays Roosevelt as a statesman, politician, president and public figure. [Roosevelt's] "Winning of the West" portrays Roosevelt as a sportsman, hunter, explorer and soldier. His "Letters to His Children" shows [Roosevelt] as a winsome, lovable, gentle father, husband and family man. Each one of these portraits was true to who Roosevelt was. We know enough from each one of them to know something. But even when we put them all together, we still don't know everything there is to know about who he was.<sup>9</sup>

As even Harry Emerson Fosdick realized, all those stories and all those figures fall short in capturing the essence of an invisible reality — the nature of one God in Three Persons. There's a simple reason they don't work: The Trinity, as such, isn't like anything in creation.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.compellingtruth.org/illustrations-of-Trinity.html> accessed 5/24/2021

<sup>8</sup> <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/fosdick-harry-emerson> accessed 5/25/2021

<sup>9</sup> at <https://www.homileticsonline.com/members/installment/2829> accessed 5/24/2021

<sup>10</sup> <https://heidelberg.net/2013/07/why-analogies-and-illustrations-of-the-trinity-fail/> accessed 5/23/2021

The Holy Trinity is a holy mystery that defies explanation. And isn't that as it should be? If we were able to completely comprehend God's wisdom and power, God's providence and mercy, just how almighty could a god like that be? But we have a God who loves us with the compassion and concern of a father or mother; we have a God who walks with us through the successes and struggles of life like a brother; we have a God who breathes new energy into us like a breath of fresh air – God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

We're reassured by God's greatness that defies our ability to comprehend, much less explain. One God in Three Persons guides and comforts and empowers us through whatever we encounter in our daily lives.

- When today's divisive political climate has us wondering how we will ever be able to collaborate and cooperate, the compassion and creativity of our Triune God is greater than that.
- When our frustration with a relationship has us at our wit's end and we don't know what to do next, the counsel of our Triune God is greater than that.
- When our plans fall through and we wonder how we're going to start from scratch, the hope we have in our Triune God is greater than that.
- When we're caught in the chasm of grief and we wonder if anyone can understand how low and unmotivated we're feeling, the comfort of our Triune God is greater even than our grief.

Let's recall how the prophet Isaiah described God's unimaginable greatness:

<sup>8</sup>For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.

<sup>9</sup>For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
so are my ways higher than your ways  
and my thoughts than your thoughts.<sup>11</sup>

Remembering my childhood, the very first hymn in the hymnal I grew up with was the hymn "Holy! Holy! Holy! Lord God Almighty!" The first verse of that hymn prescribes how we should react to waking up each day realizing that we are blessed to be children of the Triune God:

"Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!  
Early in the morning our songs shall rise to Thee;  
Holy, holy, holy! Merciful and mighty!  
God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!"<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Isaiah 55:8-9 New Revised Standard Version

<sup>12</sup> "Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!" The Presbyterian Hymnal: Hymns, Psalms and Spiritual Songs. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990, No. 138