

Pastor Jamie's Sermon

Good Shepherd Church, May 26, 2024

“Understanding the Trinity”

Young at Heart Message

The title of my sermon today – “Understanding the Trinity” – is a bit of an oxymoron because using the word “understanding” and the word “Trinity” in the same sentence doesn't really make much sense to most of us.

The Trinity is notoriously difficult, or perhaps even impossible, to understand!

There's a humorous YouTube video that I pondered showing today, but if people aren't pastors or theologians, it doesn't make much sense. But, in the video, two cartoon characters ask St. Patrick to explain the Trinity.

St. Patrick starts by telling them that there are three persons of the Trinity – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, yet there is only one God.

The two characters tell him that doesn't make any sense, and ask him to provide some analogies.

So, St. Patrick tries to offer analogies to explain the Trinity, and each time he tries, the two characters tell him his analogy doesn't work because of some theology heresy.

St. Patrick finally gets angry with the two characters, raises his voice, and says:

Fine! The Trinity is a mystery which cannot be comprehended by human reason but is understood only through faith and is best confessed in the words of the Athanasian Creed which states that we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in unity, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the substance that we are compelled by the Christian truth to confess that each distinct person is God and Lord, and that the Deity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is one, equal in glory, coequal in MAJESTY!

Here's a picture of St. Patrick's face as he says “MAJESTY!”



And here is a picture of the two characters as they say “well, why didn’t you just say that, Patrick?!”



And the joke behind this short video, is that even Patrick’s frustrated explanation doesn’t make a whole lot of sense.

And yet, the two characters seem to understand it perfectly.

So, let’s talk about the Trinity, and see what kind of understanding we can come to.

(The video can be found here, if you are curious:
<https://youtu.be/KQLfgaUoQCw?si=3HUGmtEvEcSsYYg5>)

The Message

When I was a kid, many of you know that I was raised in the Catholic Church, but chose to leave the church and not confirm into it.

In high school, I went to a Catholic Mass at my grandmother's church, and I remember distinctly asking the Priest after service why, if we believe in *one* God, are there three persons of the Trinity.

And the Priest smiled and simply said, "it's a mystery."

I have to say, that was not a satisfactory response, in my opinion, to my question.

Now, to be fair, that's a hard question to answer after a service when there are a lot of people talking with you.

I know this now since I am a pastor and find answering theological questions difficult when I am busy doing other things.

That said, my question would have been difficult to answer even if we were sitting in his office and had plenty of time to discuss it.

Without leaning on academic sources to help explain the Trinity, it really is easiest to just say, "it's a mystery we cannot fully comprehend."

Now, that said, I don't know if any of you caught it in St. Patrick's final response, but he mentioned the Athanasian Creed.

I have to admit that in all of my seminary education, I had never heard of the Athanasian Creed.

So, I looked it up. And, I discovered that it seems to provide a bit better explanation for the Trinity than most average people could offer off the top of their head.

So, I want to share it with you all today. We won't recite it together, but I'm going to read it out loud, and of course the words will also be on the screen.

Before I read it, it might be helpful to know that it was named after Athanasius, the champion of orthodoxy against Arian attacks on the doctrine of the Trinity.

(This is where the theological heresies mentioned in the video I referenced come into play, but that's another sermon entirely.)

So, without further ado, here is the Athanasian Creed. It's long, so try not to fall asleep. 😊

Whoever desires to be saved should above all hold to the catholic faith.

Anyone who does not keep it whole and unbroken will doubtless perish eternally.

Now this is the catholic faith:

That we worship one God in trinity and the trinity in unity, neither blending their persons nor dividing their essence.

For the person of the Father is a distinct person, the person of the Son is another, and that of the Holy Spirit still another. But the divinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one, their glory equal, their majesty coeternal.

What quality the Father has, the Son has, and the Holy Spirit has. The Father is uncreated, the Son is uncreated, the Holy Spirit is uncreated.

The Father is immeasurable, the Son is immeasurable, the Holy Spirit is immeasurable.

The Father is eternal, the Son is eternal, the Holy Spirit is eternal.

And yet there are not three eternal beings; there is but one eternal being. So too there are not three uncreated or immeasurable beings; there is but one uncreated and immeasurable being.

Similarly, the Father is almighty, the Son is almighty, the Holy Spirit is almighty. Yet there are not three almighty beings; there is but one almighty being.

Thus the Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God. Yet there are not three gods; there is but one God.

Thus the Father is Lord, the Son is Lord, the Holy Spirit is Lord. Yet there are not three lords; there is but one Lord.

Just as Christian truth compels us to confess each person individually as both God and Lord, so catholic religion forbids us to say that there are three gods or lords.

The Father was neither made nor created nor begotten from anyone. The Son was neither made nor created; he was begotten from the Father alone. The Holy Spirit was neither made nor created nor begotten; he proceeds from the Father and the Son.

Accordingly there is one Father, not three fathers; there is one Son, not three sons; there is one Holy Spirit, not three holy spirits.

Nothing in this trinity is before or after, nothing is greater or smaller; in their entirety the three persons are coeternal and coequal with each other.

So in everything, as was said earlier, we must worship their trinity in their unity and their unity in their trinity.

Anyone then who desires to be saved should think thus about the trinity.

But it is necessary for eternal salvation that one also believe in the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ faithfully.

Now this is the true faith:

That we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, God's Son, is both God and human, equally.

He is God from the essence of the Father, begotten before time; and he is human from the essence of his mother, born in time; completely God, completely human, with a rational soul and human flesh; equal to the Father as regards divinity, less than the Father as regards humanity.

Although he is God and human, yet Christ is not two, but one. He is one, however, not by his divinity being turned into flesh, but by God's taking humanity to himself. He is one, certainly not by the blending of his essence, but by the unity of his person. For just as one human is both rational soul and flesh, so too the one Christ is both God and human.

He suffered for our salvation; he descended to hell; he arose from the dead; he ascended to heaven; he is seated at the Father's right hand; from there he will come to judge the living and the dead. At his coming all people will arise bodily and give an accounting of their own deeds. Those who have done good will enter eternal life, and those who have done evil will enter eternal fire.

This is the catholic faith: one cannot be saved without believing it firmly and faithfully.

So...

Do we understand the Trinity better now?

I don't know about you, but when I read that, I understand the individual words, but the concept overall is only understood if I don't think too hard about it.

Part of the reason I chose to use portions of the Moravian liturgy for Trinity Sunday today is because I think it makes a little bit more sense.

We said the words “we acknowledge the profound mystery of your being, beyond our comprehension” earlier today.

When we talk about Moravian theology, we tend to lean into our “motto” – *In essentials, unity; In non-essentials, liberty; In all things, love.*

Part of the essential things we believe is in God the Father as Creator, Jesus Christ the Son as Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit as Sustainer or Sanctifier.

And for me, this is the easiest way to think about and understand the Trinity.

I think about the ways God manifests in my own life, and I believe that this is the only way our human minds can comprehend the mystery of the divine.

If I consider God as Creator, I understand the gift that God gave all of creation – the gift of life and sustenance, beauty, and majesty.

If I consider Jesus Christ, I understand the gift of Immanuel – God with us. Jesus walked with humanity to model the way to treat other beings, and then he sacrificed himself to redeem all of us.

And if I consider the Holy Spirit, I understand the gift of God’s presence in my life today – through every challenge, every heartache, and every joy.

So, regardless of how well we comprehend the mystery of the Trinity, at the very least we know how God works in our own lives.

And, perhaps that is all that we really *need* to understand. Amen.

I would like to end my sermon with a music video.

This song is called “We Believe” by a contemporary Christian group called Newsboys.

I like the song to celebrate the Trinity, but I also like the diversity and the representation of humanity in the video.

So, before we pray, enjoy the video. Feel free to sing along if you know the song, or if you catch on to the words as it plays.

https://youtu.be/WjZ01FcK0yk?si=t81g7HD_uX6vk4oM

Let us pray:

God, Creator, for your glory shining forth in sky and sea, in the changing light on the hills, in the flight of birds, in the plants of the field, for the gift of life in all its fullness, we thank you.

Jesus, Redeemer, for blessing children, healing the sick, raising up the lowly, suffering the brokenness of the world in your own body that we might have fullness of life, we thank you.

Holy Spirit, Comforter, for breathing new hope and strength into our lives, breaking down barriers, drawing human beings together in love, resisting all that diminishes fullness of life, we thank you.

Holy Trinity, in all that we do and say and are, may we always choose life, for ourselves, and for our neighbours. Amen.

~ prayer posted on the Monthly Prayers page of the Christian Aid website.
<http://www.christianaid.org.uk/>