

June 16, 2019
Ellen Fowler Skidmore
Forest Lake Presbyterian

The Truth of Trinity

Colossians 1:15-20

John 16:12-15

I bet that I have led at least 8 Disciple 1 Bible Study classes in the years I have been here at Forest Lake. And in that 34-week Bible Study we spend half of the time reading through the Old Testament. And always, students are amazed to read, think and talk about the nature of God before Jesus shows up in the New Testament. Most of the students who take Disciple 1 come into it with strong preconceived ideas about what the “God of the Old Testament” is like and how they will not like that God, but will suffer through until we can get to the real stuff in the New Testament. Always, the response to reading the Old Testament is “Wow! Amazing! Wonderful! Not at all what I expected.” And so God the Creator and God the Father becomes a much more real presence and deepens our understanding of and appreciation for the nature of God.

And, when we get to Jesus, I must admit that I am not quite old enough to have been a “Jesus freak”, but I remember how Jesus was “the man!” (in a good way), and I memorized most all of the lyrics in the musical Jesus Christ, Superstar! Jesus was such a real and concrete presence in the faith of my youth. So much so that we often we skipped the God name altogether, praying directly to Jesus. Now I see that way of praying as partial and inadequate – focusing only on one aspect of God’s nature to the exclusion of others. We derisively called those the “Wejus” days, because most every prayer began with the words, “Jesus, we just . . .” Many Christians have a passing acquaintance with God the Father, but are certain that knowing Jesus is all that is required, and is much more important than either God the Father or God the Holy Spirit – the later of whom was barely if ever mentioned.

In fact, I so rarely thought of God the Spirit as a real expression or presence of God that I very nearly had to retake one of my theological ordination exams that required me to write an essay on God the Holy Spirit. For much of my life, we talked about God the Holy Spirit on Pentecost – One Sunday a year – and then went back to Jesus. God the Holy Spirit was not all that real to me, but was – I assumed – kept in business by the Pentecostals – of which I was not one.

But, the older I get the more important to me – more meaningful - are the theological understandings of The Doctrine of the Trinity in shaping not only how we think about who God is, but how we think about how Christians are to live, act and talk in the world.

The doctrine of the Trinity is uniquely Christian – growing out of the Church’s reading of Scripture and wrestling with passages like the ones we read today. Christians confess that there is only one God. This truth we hold in common with our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters. But it is the description of the nature of God as a Trinity that makes the Jews and Muslims look at Christianity and accuse us of worshiping multiple gods. How can there be One God but three persons, they ask? By saying that Jesus is fully God, fully human are you not saying that there are at least two gods?

And, honestly, the way that many Christians use the language about God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit, we leave ourselves open to this criticism. We talk about the God of the Old Testament, as if that God is different. Then, we use Jesus as a weapon, saying that if you don’t know Jesus, then you don’t know God. But neither of these positions takes seriously the Scriptures – both Old and New Testaments. So, I want to make a case for the truth that comes from perceiving God as Trinity.

When Christians say that the nature of God is Trinitarian, we affirm that God is a holy mystery, the source of all that is, and by God’s very nature is beyond our ability to comprehend fully. When we look at God, we are looking at a mystery that resists our attempts to dissect, name and separate. We are describing a God whose nature is relationship. This God will not be reduced to the protagonist of *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, no matter how compelling the lyrics. This God is so far beyond our categories or ability to understand that when we begin to talk about God we are reduced to similes: God is like an apple – skin, flesh and core: one apple three parts. Or, God is like H₂O: the same chemical compound that is known in three manifestations – water, steam and ice. But every simile leaves us with the clear impression that we are describing something that we cannot fully see. Like the old story of the blind men who describe the elephant based on what part they can feel, we only describe God based on our limited access and experience. So, the insight that God is One God, but three persons is both a reminder of our finitude and lack of understanding, and an invitation to peer deeply into a subject that is beyond our ability to know fully or to explain. To talk of God as Trinity requires our humility and keeps a check on our certainty about what God is like, what God thinks and what God will do in the world and in us.

So, the first truth that we gain by taking about God as Trinity is the affirmation that God is a Holy Mystery – able to be known, described and loved, but never fully known, described or loved by humans. Therefore, to know God requires that we be humble, and requires that we acknowledge the limits of our knowledge. And in my experience, it is exactly the presence of humility in preachers and teachers that give me confidence that they actually have known God. Be careful of proud and certain Christians – they may not know their blind spots. Those who are most certain often confuse what they know with all that there is to know.

Knowing God is a lifelong process, never fully achieved in this reality. So, Jesus tells his disciples that even though they have known him as fully as any human beings can – they ate with him, walked with him, questioned him, loved him – even they could not hold the truth of God’s nature and purpose. Then, Jesus tells them that it is to their advantage that he is leaving them,

so that the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, can come and can guide them into all truth. (Jn 16:7 & 13) In Romans, the Apostle Paul cautions Christians to “live in harmony with one another; do not be proud, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.” (Romans 12:16) God is Holy Mystery, and to begin even to know God requires humility and restraint in our claims to know God.

But, the second truth that God as Trinity affirms is that God is knowable and that truth is accessible. And the way we human beings come to know truth is through relationship. Because God is a Holy Mystery, beyond our comprehension, does not mean that we cannot know God. In fact, this is the genius and the power of God the Son. Colossians calls Jesus “the image of the invisible God.” God knows that human beings only come to know truth in relationship, and so God came to earth in human form so that we might know God’s love, God’s purpose, God’s nature through relationship with Christ. “For in [Jesus] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.” (Colossians 1:20)

I want to cut to the “so what” here. What I have come to understand is that truth – especially God’s truth – is not primarily known by being able to agree with or to assent to specific statements or propositions. To be a Christian believer in God is primarily NOT to be able to give intellectual assent to a list of beliefs or theological propositions. To be a Christian believer in God is FIRST to enter into a living, daily relationship with God that changes us from the inside out. Having received and lived the gift of that relationship, then we can begin to speak about what we have come to know as true. But to maintain that to become a Christian you must first agree with the following list of beliefs is to get the whole process backwards.

It is not that theological propositions are not helpful or don’t matter, but that they only grow out of a living, loving relationship with the God who is Holy Mystery – One God known to us in three different persons.

When faith is primarily a relationship, then we are changed by that relationship and truth is recognized as a result of living that relationship. The relationship is always primary.

“We love because God first loved us” says Scripture. (1 John 4:19) And we can talk about what love is when we have struggled – sometimes failing and sometimes succeeding – to love each other. There is nothing like a committed marriage to show the shallowness and unreal nature of a love that is sentimental – lived out on Instagram and facebook - but not able to withstand the rigors of conflict and loss. So, when we are friends with those who disagree with us, married to someone with whom we cannot agree, we must decide which is most important – our personal opinion or our ability to love each other. I would argue that staying in relationship with those with whom we disagree and choosing to love helps us discern truth much more effectively than retreating to like-minded bubbles. Love is not known in the abstract. Love is only known through relationship. I have said before, that it is easy to say, “I love people!” But saying, “I love people” is meaningless unless we can love another person. And individual people are

frustrating, stinky and inconvenient. We can only talk with conviction about love once we have worked to love another person. The truth of love is only known in relationship – not in the abstract. God works in the world through relationship – that is what Jesus came to teach and model for us – for the purpose of reconciliation and truth.

And if our love for God is not also manifest in how we live with one another, then the critics are right to question whether or not we know God. If those who claim to love God spend all of their time dividing up over theological affirmations, cutting ourselves off from those from whom we differ, then all we are doing is showing we know little about the nature and purpose of God: to reconcile all things.

When we sacrifice community and reconciliation over theological propositions, then we cut ourselves off from the very source of truth – relationship with God and the community of Christ. So, in this country right now, churches are dividing up over whether they agree on the role of women, same sex ordination and marriage, and political party allegiances. To be a part of a community that defines itself by whether or not we all agree on theological or political affirmations – can we check the boxes and say the right words – is for me the opposite of what Jesus came to do. Jesus says that the presence/person of God who will come after his death – the Advocate or the Holy Spirit – will glorify Jesus and will witness to God's truth. And the Apostle Paul says that the truth of God – as evidenced in the person of Jesus Christ – is that God is about reconciling everything and making peace.

Reconciling and making peace requires relationship – a disciplined decision to act in the world for God's purpose – to decide to know God and to be open to suffer as God suffered because of our love of others. And that sort of relationship is not defined or limited by any theological checklist, but is manifested in the messy but powerful relationships that we have with those with whom we disagree. Trinity reminds us that God does not fit into our intellectual categories.

Instead of siding with those whose theological beliefs agree with our own, Christians are to be those who seek daily to know God, to love God and to live that relationship with others – living with and loving them just as God has loved us – when they deserve it or not, when they return our love or not, when we agree or not. So, the mark of truth is the health and love of the relationships that faith creates – not some party checklist of theological propositions. Want to know God? Look for love – disciplined, self-sacrificial love. Look for reconciliation. Look for real peace – not just negotiated silence. Look for those who spend more time pointing to the holy and powerful mystery of God than they spend pointing to how certain they are that they are right. There we will find God – in all of the power and weakness that we have come to know in the God revealed in Scripture:

God the Father; God the Son; God the Holy Spirit.

May our love for that God be evident in us and in this community of faith.

To God be the glory.