

Build Community
John 16: 12-15
Ann Hatfield

First, thanks to everyone who is wearing school colors! The Equipping the Emerging Generation Team invited us to show school spirit this morning, as a way of connecting with the younger generation at Westminster. We hope the apparel you have chosen will spark conversations, make connections, and build community within our church family.

That said, even though we are wearing school colors, this is NOT Penn State, Miami, or Hopkins Sunday, but Trinity Sunday. No, not Trinity College, not Trinity University,but the HOLY TRINITY!!!

Discussing the Holy Trinity can be challenging. On Trinity Sunday, we celebrate a theological concept; one which is not explicitly expressed in Scripture. In fact, the word “Trinity” does not appear in the Bible. Instead, early Christians developed the doctrine of the Trinity as they articulated how God is experienced as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; one God – in three persons – all equal in divinity, yet distinct in personality.

Over the centuries, countless theologians have written mountains of books trying to explain the Trinity. St. Augustine famously declared, “*If you can understand it, it cannot be God.*”¹ With that mindset, many Christians throw up their hands, declare the Trinity a deep mystery, and go home!

Wait, not you! Don’t go yet!

While the doctrine of the Trinity may feel like an abstract, theological puzzle that is impossible to fully understand, there are many good reasons to ponder and explore its significance for us. Let me share just THREE of them. (You know, sort of Trinitarian.....)

First, Trinity Sunday is an opportunity to consider God’s unselfish, sacrificial love. The Bible is full of examples of God’s love for humanity and creation. John’s Gospel proclaims God so loved the world that God gave his only Son – God incarnate in Jesus Christ.

Today’s passage is part of the farewell discourse Jesus shared with his disciples. Just as the Father sent Jesus, now Jesus promises the forthcoming gift of the Holy Spirit (which we celebrated last Sunday on Pentecost). First in Jesus, and now through the Holy Spirit, God promises to be with us forever. So, Trinity Sunday reminds us God’s very being is expressed in love – love that is always with us and for us.

Second, on Trinity Sunday we celebrate the interdependent and interrelated nature of God. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the perfect model of relational harmony and unity. They are the community in which God's love is freely and unselfishly shared. God is relationship, intimacy, connection, and fellowship.²

It is in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that we will baptize baby Julia Miller this morning. Baptism is a visible expression of God welcoming us into this community. And what makes community and relationships work? LOVE. At the heart of Trinity Sunday is the community of God who claims us in love.

To illustrate, let me share a story about an eight-year-old girl, I'll call Kathy. Kathy was adopted as a young child, and the first adoption did not go smoothly. After a couple rough years the family dissolved the relationship. Eventually, Kathy found herself welcomed into another family.

For unknown reasons, the previous parents never fully integrated Kathy into their family. They took their biological children to Disney World several times, but always left Kathy behind with a family friend. In Kathy's mind this happened because she did something wrong. Kathy had seen pictures of Disney World, but never experienced it herself. When her new parents learned this, they made plans to take Kathy to Disney World.

From previous experience, they knew Disney World can transform even well-behaved children into bundles of emotional instability. What they *didn't* expect was that simply the prospect of the trip would produce a stream of bad behavior in Kathy. In the month before the vacation, Kathy stole food, instead of asking for a snack. She lied (when telling the truth would have been easier). She started fights with her siblings. As Disney World got closer, Kathy's rebellion increased.

Two days before leaving for Florida, her parents talked with Kathy about her latest transgression. "I know what you're going to do," Kathy stated flatly. "You're not going to take me to Disney World, are you?" The thought never crossed their minds, but suddenly Kathy's downward spiral made sense.

Kathy's parents were tempted to use her fear for their own advantage. They easily could have responded, "You're right. If you don't start behaving, we won't take you with us." But, by God's grace, they didn't. Instead, they asked, "You know we are taking this trip as a family, don't you?" Kathy nodded, her brown eyes rimmed with tears. "And are you part of this family?" She nodded again. "Then we are not leaving you behind. You are going with us."

The first night in the hotel room, Kathy was exhausted and a little weepy, but her month-long rebellion had faded. At bedtime, her father asked, "So how was your first day at Disney World?" Kathy closed her eyes and hugged her stuffed Mickey Mouse. After a moment, she opened her eyes. "Daddy," she said, "I finally got to go to Disney World. But it wasn't because I was good; it's because I'm yours."³

It wasn't because I was good; it's because I'm yours. That is the good news of our belonging to a good and gracious God. Even when we do not know it, feel it, or understand it, God's extravagant, sacrificial love is there surrounding us. God claims us in a covenantal relationship of grace – loving us in community – through the good and the bad – as only God can.

Third – and finally – on Trinity Sunday we remember every person – you and me included – are created in the image of God. Which means we are called to pattern our lives after the character of our triune God. Living in a culture that promotes individualism and encourages self-interest above caring for others, this is can be challenging. Nonetheless, you and I are called to collaboration and mutual concern for one another. God calls us to strengthen relationships and build community – not by using fear and threats – but by sharing God's love in gracious hospitality and fellowship.

Yes, the truth of God will always exceed our understanding. But the love of God is always as close and near to us as Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

It is helpful for us to grapple with the deep mystery of the triune God, because Trinity Sunday inspires us to ask, “How are we reflecting the character of our generous, collaborative, sacrificial, and loving God? Will they know we are Christians by our love?”

What better day for us to make connections and build community within our church family than on Trinity Sunday. Before you go rushing off to share your school spirit, celebrate fathers, and consume sticky buns, let me close in the name of our triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.

¹ Quoted by Alister E. McGrath in *Understanding the Trinity*, Zondervan Publishing House, 1988.

² Debie Thomas, *Journey With Jesus*, “The Trinity: So What?” June 9, 2019.

³ Adapted from Daniel Montgomery and Timothy Paul Jones, *PROOF: Finding Freedom Through the Intoxicating Joy of Irresistible Grace*, Zondervan, 2014.