

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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The Oneness of God

Romans 5:1-11

Marguerite Shuster tells about a friend, a theologian, who was working late in his office when a custodian came in to clean. After emptying the wastebaskets and completing some other tasks, the custodian paused and asked the theologian a question. "What do you believe about God?" he said. And Shuster's friend responded, out of a theologian's mind, "Well, I believe God is a Trinity. . . ." That, as Shuster recalls, was pretty much the end of that conversation.¹

The Trinity is a subject that can have that kind of effect on a conversation. In some cases, it can provoke lengthy and vigorous debate, full of penetrating insights. But in other cases, it can bring dialogue to a screeching halt, mainly because the Trinity seems to generate more questions than answers, more complexity than clarity. True, we try to get a better handle on the mystery of the Trinity by comparing Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to a three leaf clover, or to the three forms of water (liquid, steam, ice). In each case, you've got three in one. But it really doesn't matter whether you're doing a children's lesson, a sermon, or a seminar paper, exploring the Trinity always leaves you with the sense that you're engaging something you just can't wrap your brain around.

Saint Augustine was one of the great theologians, as well as a bishop, in the early church. The story is told that shortly after finishing his book called *On the Trinity*, he was walking along the Mediterranean shore on the coast of North Africa when he came upon a boy who kept filling a bucket with seawater and pouring it into a large hole in the sand. "Why are you doing that?" Augustine asked the boy. "I'm pouring the Mediterranean Sea into the hole," the boy replied in all seriousness. "My dear boy, what an impossible thing to try to do!" chided Augustine. "The sea is far too vast, and your hole is far too small." Then as Augustine continued his walk, it dawned on him that in his efforts to write on the Trinity he was much like that boy: the subject was far too vast, and his mind was far too small!

Thankfully your salvation doesn't depend on how completely you can grasp the Trinity, but on how completely the God who is Trinity has grasped you. That conviction undergirds Paul's message to the Christians in Rome as we hear this morning's Scripture reading. In this passage, Paul begins the next major section of his letter. He starts out by summarizing the theme of the previous section, justification by faith. In other words, God has acted to put us in right relationship with himself, and faith is the way we appropriate what God has done and have it become effective in our lives. So far, Paul has mainly used courtroom language to describe God's saving work for us. Though we're all captive to sin and guilty of disobedience, a merciful God has acquitted us and put us back to where we're supposed to be in our relationship with him.

In today's text, Paul now shifts his focus to what this restored, ongoing relationship with God looks like. And the main thing it looks like is peace. That is, the life promised to the person who is righteous by faith is a life of peace with God. "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 1). Notice that the God whom we call Father has acted to reconcile us to himself through the Son. So the one we speak of as the second person of the Trinity is God's way of dealing with our alienation from God. That's because apart from Christ, we're at enmity with our

Creator. We're in a state of rebellion and hostility toward the God who made us in his image. And God himself, who is opposed to all that's evil and all that distorts the goodness of his creation, is at enmity with us as sinners. But the good news is that through the crucifixion of Jesus, who died in our place and suffered the penalty of our sins, we're forgiven and freed for life in restored relationship with God. As Paul goes on to say later in our passage, Christ's death means that God has made peace with us, even though we were his enemies. And if God has done that, then surely we can count on God to finish his work of salvation in us (vv. 9-10). That's the basis of our confidence in God and our hope for the future.

Notice how our convictions about the Trinity are woven into Paul's description of how God has reconciled us to himself. The Father, present and working through the Son, has turned enemies into friends, and promises to bring his peace into the whole creation. Now we'll eventually get to the role of the Holy Spirit in all this. But even at this stage, we can already begin to see how the Trinity forms the infrastructure of the gospel.

And when we say Trinity, we don't mean three separate agents doing the best they can to coordinate with one another and to make sure that their plans and purposes are in sync. No, the relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is much more intimate and unified than that. I think, for instance, of what Paul says in 2 Corinthians, where he summarizes the good news by saying, "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation" (5:18-19). Whether Paul says, as he does here, "in Christ," or as in our Romans text, "through Christ," he means that God and Christ, Father and Son, were active together in the work of reconciliation.

This means that when it comes to Christ's atoning death, we shouldn't drive a wedge between God and Jesus, as if the crucifixion is about the harsh and punitive Father unleashing his wrath on the meek and helpless Son. No, we believe that Jesus was both human and divine, which means that God himself, in and through the Son, has entered our state of affairs and experienced firsthand the effects of our alienation and lostness, in order to save us.

Preacher and scholar John Stott, commenting on the concept of substitution, has put it so powerfully when he writes:

The concept of substitution may be said, then, to lie at the heart of both sin and salvation. For the essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be; God sacrifices himself for man and puts himself where only man deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives which belong to God alone; God accepts penalties which belong to man alone.²

Stott speaks of a picture described by preacher George Buttrick. The picture, which hangs in an Italian church, is a depiction of the death of Jesus. At first glance it looks like many other paintings of the crucifixion. But as you look more closely, you see that there's a difference. As Buttrick says, "there's a vast and shadowy figure behind the figure of Jesus. The nail that pierces the hand of Jesus goes through to the hand of God. The spear thrust into the side of Jesus goes through into God's."³

When we say that we believe in the Trinity, we're not just checking off one of the boxes on a list of biblical teachings, or voicing our affirmation of a dusty old theological doctrine. No, when we say that we believe in the Trinity, we're saying something crucial about who God is, what God is like, and how God has acted in order to prove his love for us and to rescue us from eternal condemnation. When we say that we believe in the Trinity, we're saying

that in Christ, God has given us his very own self, so that we can be reconciled to him and to one another.

Remember that the peace God has created through the death of Jesus has both a vertical and a horizontal dimension. The vertical dimension means reconciliation between God and human beings. The horizontal dimension means reconciliation between human beings. That includes relationships between individual human beings and relationships between groups of human beings. In other words, the cross has social implications. God's plan and purpose isn't simply to save a collection of loosely connected individuals, but to create a new humanity. And Paul saw this new humanity taking shape in the church in Rome as Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians were being united into one fellowship by the grace of God, though not without struggles and tensions. In fact, this ongoing gospel work of bringing together diverse individuals and groups that have previously been estranged from one another is one of the big reasons Paul writes this letter that we call Romans.

Paul doesn't let up when it comes to oneness in Christ. That's because he knows that God doesn't let up when it comes to oneness in Christ. Indeed, God is in the business of oneness. Oneness between himself and human beings, and oneness between human beings. How could it be otherwise with God? God, after all, is one. And yet that oneness includes threeness. God is one being comprised of three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And the oneness they share, the fellowship they share, and the love they share, are to be embodied and reflected in our relationship with God and with one another.

One person has written, "Self-giving love is the Trinity's signature."⁴ What a necessary reminder that for all its mystery and magnificence, the Trinity is fundamentally about God's self-giving, self-emptying love for us. No matter how much we try to explore, explain, and expound the Trinity, if we miss what it tells us about God's reconciling and saving love, we've missed the whole point. In a day and time when so many people think of God primarily as what one author has called "a loveless dictator in the sky," the Trinity tells us that through the Son, the Father has come near. So near, in fact, that Paul can say of believers that through the Holy Spirit, the very love and presence of God have been poured into our hearts (v. 5). Now God doesn't get much closer than that.

Following the horrible shooting at the historic African American church in Charleston, South Carolina this past week, we've witnessed the presence of God in many ways. In the comfort given to the congregation and community. In the coming together of so many people to mourn together and to renew their sense of hope through Christ. And especially on Friday, when some of the relatives of the slain spoke directly to the accused gunman, Dylann Roof, during his bond hearing. While acknowledging their pain, loss, and anger, some of the relatives spoke extraordinary words of mercy. One of them, a daughter of victim Ethel Lance, said, "I will never be able to hold her again, but I forgive you. And have mercy on your soul. You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people but God forgives you, and I forgive you."

How is it possible for someone in that state of pain and suffering to offer forgiveness? Where could such words of mercy come from? I believe they come from hearts into which God has poured his love through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of a God who knows what it means to forgive enemies, and to reconcile to himself those who are hostile to him. A Father whose Son died for us while we were still sinners (v. 8), and whose Spirit fills our lives with his self-giving love, so that we can be one with God and with one another.

¹ Marguerite Shuster, "Struggling to Conceive God." *The Living Pulpit* (April-June 1999) 6.

² John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 1986) 160.

³ Buttrick is quoted in Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 158.

⁴ Roderick Leupp, *Knowing the Name of God: A Trinitarian Tapestry of Grace, Faith, and Community* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 1996) 28.