

**TRINITY SUNDAY SERMON**  
**JOHN 3:1-17**

Rev. David L. Masterson, Ph.D.

Today is Trinity Sunday. How does one preach about such a profound mystery as the inner life of God himself? We begin by humbly acknowledging our finite limitations. As John Newton says, "Far from attempting to explain the doctrine of the Trinity to my hearers, I rather wish to say it is to us incomprehensible. But if it be contained in the Scripture it is thereby sufficiently proved."

What is it that the Bible teaches about the doctrine of the Holy Trinity? That God is One and that he is Three-In-One. That the Father is not the Son, nor is the Son the Father, and that the Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son. There is one God—and there are three distinct persons in that one God.

Man, the Bible teaches, is made in the image of God, and to Christians God means the Trinity; therefore only in the light of the doctrine of the Trinity can man understand who he is and what God intends him to be. Preachers have historically used various symbols to illustrate the Trinity. There is the use of a three-pedal shamrock leaf by St. Patrick; a triangle, three points and yet one; and three rings tied together as one. Francis Bacon said that the human mind has three faculties which together function as a trinity: memory, imagination and reason, by means of which we are able to comprehend truth.

St. Augustine uses the analogy of the soul saying that the three powers of existing, knowing, and willing form one soul. Even so, God is, God knows, and God wills. God eternally begets His Word, the Son [who is the divine knowing]; and in that knowing proceeds God's love or will in the divine Spirit. The Word begotten, the Spirit proceeding: Father, Son and Spirit: one spiritual life, one substance, in which these three are co-equal, co-eternal persons.

Far from being merely an obscure matter for theologians and academicians to argue over, the Athanasian Creed states that the doctrine of the Trinity is necessary for salvation. How can this be? Because salvation consists in knowing, loving and living with God. If we are to know, love, and live with God we must understand as much about Him as is humanly possible. While the nature of Almighty God is a mystery, and the infinite being of God is not to be comprehended by the finite intellect, yet, it is not an "unknown God" we worship and are called to serve. The whole message of the Gospel is that God can be known fully in His Son Jesus Christ. God is not some ethereal, abstract principle, nor is He an impersonal force in the universe. The actuality of God in His being, knowing, and loving as Father, Son, and Spirit, is the very Ground of all Reality. God is One, He is True, and He can be known in His three Persons. That is what the doctrine of the Trinity means, and, therefore, we take this truth very seriously.

Now the best way to understand the Trinity is to see all three persons of God at work in the experience of the new birth described in our text of John chapter 3. Jesus said,

“Except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God. Marvel not that I say unto thee, Ye must be born again.” Let’s try to understand these verses together.

Nicodemus, a Pharisee and ruler of the Jews, came to Jesus at night. He came to Jesus like so many modern people do—with inadequate conceptions of His uniqueness and sufficiency. He said, “Rabbi, we know that thou art a Teacher come from God.” This is the problem with every other world religion except Christianity—they acknowledge Jesus as a Teacher come from God, but not as “the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholding all things by the Word of His power” (Hebrews 1:3). Hinduism sees Jesus as a spiritual leader, one of many incarnations of God, but fails to acknowledge the uniqueness of Jesus as the eternal Word made flesh. Islam sees Jesus as a prophet and apostle, but stops short of acknowledging Him as God-in-the-flesh come to die for our salvation. The Sufi religion concentrates on Jesus’ healing powers, His peacefulness and His devotion to God, but refuses to believe in the fullness and sufficiency of God’s self-revelation in Christ and His Cross. The Dalai Lama, arguably the most famous Buddhist in the world, teaches that Jesus is the model of a “spiritually mature, good, and warm-hearted person.” To emulate him, we should practice meditation. But Jesus in Buddhist understanding, is not the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, God incarnate for our salvation, to be worshipped and adored. Mormons and Jehovah Witnesses both deny the deity of Christ and teach that He was created and born into the world as all other men.

Now in fairness to Nicodemus, his understanding that Jesus is a Teacher and miracle-worker sent from God is a good step in the right direction. He is on his way to becoming a true believer in Jesus. But his confession falls miserably beneath the grandeur and majesty of Christ’s Person and Work. Jesus towers over all other figures of history precisely because He is not of this earth; He is from heaven, the Second Person of the Trinity, God manifest in the flesh for our salvation.

Notice what Jesus says in response to this incomplete confession by Nicodemus. He points out the deepest and universal need of every man. Jesus doesn’t address Nicodemus merely on an intellectual level; He goes straight to the profound need of his heart: “Ye must be born again.” In order to participate in the Kingdom of God what is needed is a radical change in our whole nature and character. Unless our inner being is entirely transformed there is no forgiveness of sin, no Heaven for us, no fellowship with God, and no abundant life in His Spirit. What the world wants and needs is not a Teacher—but a Life-giver. Deep down inside, men already know this truth. What is needed is divine power to reform men’s hearts and make them holy before God. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, “Therefore if any man be in Christ he is a new creature; old things are passed away, behold all things are become new.” Only the work of the Holy Trinity can accomplish the inner transformation man so urgently needs.

Jesus and Jesus alone meets the necessity of forgiveness of sins and the gift of new life. There are two “musts” in His conversation with Nicodemus in this story. He says in John 3:7, “Ye must be born again”, and then He tells us how that new birth is accomplished: John 3:14, “The Son of Man must be lifted up.” It is Christ’s work as

Redeemer—His holy sacrifice on the Cross—which saves the world from sin! A good, warm-hearted teacher or compassionate leader will not do. Redemption and reconciliation with God requires a perfect, holy sacrifice—the spotless, sinless, Son of God!

If we are to understand Jesus Christ, we must understand the reality, universality and seriousness of sin. Only when we see ourselves as great sinners in need of cleansing, pardon, and a new nature will we truly understand Jesus, for the Cross—and not His moral teaching—is the very heart of the work He came to do. I repeat, what the world needs is not a warm-hearted Teacher, but a perfect, holy sacrifice for sin which accomplishes complete transformation and new life within by the regeneration of the Holy Spirit.

Therefore the ‘must’ of the Cross answers the deepest need of our human nature. Reconciliation with God could only be accomplished by One who yielded Himself up for the sins of the world. Jesus must die because He must save, and He must save because He loved us. It was not the nails and hammers of the Roman soldiers which held Jesus upon the Cross. It was, quite literally, your sin and mine. The utterly Righteous One, who is everlastingly pure and perfect, died in our place as rebellious sinners.

But it is more than that. The Cross is not only Christ’s greatest humiliation, but His greatest exaltation. Jesus said in John 12:23, “The hour is come when the Son of Man will be glorified.” In the Cross Jesus was lifted up in triumphant display and honor before all the Universe. The Cross becomes His throne from which Jesus rules the world. In the Cross is the supreme manifestation of God’s holiness, love, and power. To save humanity from damnation that men might be born again and enter into the Kingdom of God was the greatest work of the Holy Trinity in all history. Greater than the creation of the Universe out of nothing; greater than the creation of sun, moon, stars, and planets. Greater than the forming of man in God’s own image and likeness. For in the Second Adam hanging on the Cross, humanity is restored from its debilitating Fall and brought back again into communion and right relationship with God.

How is this new birth received? By faith in the finished work of Christ. Three times in these verses, Jesus uses the word “believe.” This word means far more than mere intellectual assent. True faith advances beyond mental belief. There is an intellectual side to faith, but its essence is trust, the act of the will throwing itself completely upon God and resting in Him. Knowing and trusting are two different things.

On June 30, 1859 the famous acrobat, Charles Blondin, became the first man in history to walk on a tightrope across Niagara Falls. Over twenty-five thousand people gathered to watch him walk 1,100 feet suspended on a tiny rope above the raging waters without a net or safety harness. In the days that followed, Blondin walked across the Falls many times. Once he carried his manager across riding piggyback. Then he pushed a wheelbarrow across loaded with 350 pounds of cement. He asked cheering spectators if they thought he could push a man across the falls sitting in the wheelbarrow. Spying

someone cheering loudly, he asked, “Sir, do you think I could safely carry you across in this wheelbarrow?” “Yes, of course,” the man replied. “Get in,” the Great Blondin said with a smile. The man refused. Why? He knew Blondin could safely cross the falls. But he had only intellectual faith—a mental comprehension and not real, life-changing trust. Had he really believed and trusted fully in Blondin’s ability as a tight-rope walker, he would have crawled into the wheelbarrow and been transported safely to the other side.

Without a new birth brought about in our hearts through the will of the Father, by the obedience of the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit no one can enter into the Kingdom of God. The work of sacrifice on the Cross is complete. It is for us only to place our entire trust in Christ—to crawl into the wheelbarrow—and rely entirely upon His finished work of salvation at Calvary.

What about you? Do you believe—not just with your head—but with all your heart? Do you have complete “*get in the wheelbarrow and cross the falls*” faith? Have you received Jesus Christ as your personal LORD and Saviour? Are you relying entirely, completely upon Jesus for salvation? “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life!”

God has revealed Himself to man as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In His incommunicable essence we know God as Father. In His work as redeeming the world we know Him as Son; in His dwelling within us and animating our being, we know Him as Spirit.

In a few moments we will receive Communion. We will offer to God the Father the gift of His Son Jesus Christ on the Cross, through the power of the Holy Spirit. As we receive His body and blood, we will make a gift—a sacrifice—of ourselves, in Christ, to the Father. We are empowered to do this because we have been born again of water and the Holy Spirit. We have been made the adopted children of our heavenly Father, graced by God Himself.

Let us pray.

“Almighty and everlasting God, who hast given unto us thy servants grace, by the confession of a true faith, to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity and in the power of the Divine Majesty to worship the Unity; We beseech thee that thou wouldest keep us steadfast in this faith.”

For of Him, and through Him, and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory both now and for ever. Amen.”