

Triune Worship, Triune Life

A Sermon on Romans 5:1-5

Delivered by Rich Holmes on June 16, 2019 at Northminster Presbyterian Church

Well, I think long before I extended my blessings to all my fellow fathers today, everyone already knew that today was Fathers' Day, but while you knew that, you may not know that it is also Trinity Sunday—the one day a year on the Christian calendar that is devoted to a celebration of the three in one. Now, I am just curious, how many of you knew that.

For my sermon on Trinity Sunday, I thought I would begin by telling you about a colleague of mine who I had lunch with one time years ago. Every year on Trinity Sunday, this person comes up to the pulpit armed with some quotes from theologians like Luther and Calvin, and he tries to explain the how it is possible that three can be one and one can be three.

Now, you can probably imagine how well this goes over. In fact, what this friend of mine has discovered is that this is a Sunday when much of the congregation has decided it would be a good time to skip church—and about half way through the sermon those who didn't skip find themselves wishing they had.

So my friend told me all about this annual exercise, and he finally said to me, "Rich, I've had it with Trinity Sunday. I would rather get a root canal than preach one more sermon on the Trinity."

Well, unlike my friend, I do not think Trinity Sunday is necessarily the time to get up behind the pulpit and try to explain how one can be three and three can be one. For let's say I could get up here and explain the Trinity so that all of you could understand it with perfect clarity. Ask yourself, what difference would that make in your life? Oh sure, it may help you understand something you didn't understand before, but then what? Would that make you a better person

for even one day? Would it inspire you to do anything that you hadn't done before? Would it move you to be any more compassionate toward anyone who is suffering, or neglected or abused? The problem is not just that the Trinity is difficult to understand, in fact, it may be impossible to understand, but the problem is that even if we could understand it, what difference would it make?

Now, I have to tell you that I hope that none of us choose to skip church on Trinity Sunday, not only is this not a day to skip, it is one of the most important times to worship in the entire Christian year. But it is not because this is a time to talk about how one can be three and three can be one. It is rather because it is a time to reflect on what it means for our lives of faith if we live out our faith by worshipping a God who is three, and yet a God who is also one.

So what does it mean to worship such a God? Well, I think that to answer that question we need to start by thinking about what it would mean to worship something other than such a God. What would it mean if we were to worship not the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but the Father alone, the Son alone, or the Spirit alone. Well, fortunately or maybe unfortunately, I don't think we have to think too hard to consider what this would be like, there are countless examples among us of people who may strive to be faithful to the triune God, but who, for one reason or another lapse into a worship only one of the three, or all three but not one God.

So let us start with those who worship the Father alone, what does that look like? Well, I think it would mean worshipping a God who is the creator of this earth and all that is in it. And such a worship would mean celebrating the beauty of the created earth. It would mean taking the environment seriously, believing that we have a responsibility to care for animals, to care about the cleanliness of lakes, rivers and streams, and of course the air we breathe, and it

certainly means to care about human beings above all else who are made in the image of God. It would therefore also mean caring about human rights, caring about poverty, caring about those who lack of educational opportunities and health care when they are sick. These things are all quite important. But there would also be something seriously lacking in such a worship. There would be no understanding or appreciation of the fact that we who are made in the image of God are also sinners and that we who are made in the image of God are in need of a savior. And it may be at times you see quite successful churches that ultimately worship the Father alone. But success is not necessarily a sign of faithfulness. I once saw an interview with the pastor of a famous megachurch who was asked why there were no crosses on display in his church. He had a great sanctuary with state of the art lighting and a beautiful sound system and comfortable seating, but no crosses. He said "I just don't think the whole of Christianity can be captured by a single symbol". I can understand that. But I also think when you're trying to build a popular church that everyone feels good about, who needs a reminder that we are sinners in need of a savior? Who needs a reminder that we are such sinners that it took a savior to die for us in order for our sins to be forgiven.

There are serious limitations to worshipping the father alone, but what about worshipping the Son alone. Well, we see that in worship, too. We see this in congregations that are all about saving souls and counting up the number of souls who have been saved in the world but who care nothing about the needs of this world. There is no need to worry about the poisoning of rivers, lakes and oceans, there is no need to worry about sickness and hunger, there is no need to worry about the poverty of half the world trying to survive on about 2 dollars a day. There is no need to worry about human rights abuses. The world is the dying home of the condemned,

and God is going to rapture all the believers out of this world, so who really cares about this world. I sometimes call this Layover Christianity. The world is not a place you really inhabit, it's just a place you're passing through, just like a place where you have an airport layover as your waiting for your next flight out of here. But some people may say to me "What's wrong with all this? What could possibly be wrong with worshipping Jesus alone? Didn't Jesus say 'I am the way, the truth and the life?'" Indeed he did. But the entire quote is "I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me." And it is important to be aware that what we actually find in the life of Jesus is not someone who just cared about the salvation of our souls, but someone who cared deeply about this world that the Father created. What we find in the person of Jesus Christ is not just someone who died on the cross, but someone who fed five thousand hungry people. What we find in Jesus Christ is not someone who talked about salvation for those who believe, but someone who made the lame to walk and the blind to see. What we find in the person of Jesus Christ is not just someone who talked about people being raptured out of this world, but someone who said "Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones...will certainly not lose his reward." Worshipping the Son alone may seem faithful to God when you take a couple of verses of scripture out of context, but at the end of the day, it is no more faithful than worshipping the Father alone, and so it is not faithful at all.

And what about those congregations that worship the Spirit alone. Do they exist? Sure they do. I don't think you will find many such congregations among Presbyterians, but they are out there. Sometimes, such congregations are all about what kinds of spiritual gifts you have. Do you speak in tongues? Do you prophesy? Do you heal? Do you interpret tongues? But it is all for

showing off and not about building up the church. Or less supernaturally, at other times they are congregations that are all about emotion and the good feelings of worship and not about giving due consideration to what those feelings are about. And that is not biblical, because feelings can come from God or the devil. That is why first John says “Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God.” Test the spirits! Don’t just trust your feelings. I have to tell you that it is with the greatest reluctance that I would warn us about being too spiritual. Most of the congregations that I have been a part of in my lifetime haven’t exactly had a problem with being too spiritual, if anything they weren’t spiritual enough. They were all about following a rigid set of rules and traditions without giving much thought to whether those rules and traditions from some past era fit with where God had them now—and they had services of worship that may have spoken to your intellect, but they didn’t speak to much else. They usually left you feeling emotionally empty inside. God knows that we have a real need for the Holy Spirit in many of our churches, and I am not taking the Lord’s name in vain when I say that. I mean what I say, God knows it. But imitating those congregations that worship the Spirit alone is not the answer. I am all in favor of emotional warmth, I am all in favor of joy and good feelings, but do those feelings lead you to do what scripture also tells you to do, and to a lesser extent what our confessions lead you to do. If so, then those feelings are likely from God. If not, they are not, and be not deceived by them.

Finally, I wish to say a word about worshipping a God who is three but a God who is not also one. What do these congregations look like? Well, they are divided congregations, or they are those congregations where the differences among them which concern theology, politics, or even worship styles are reason enough to exist as one congregation in name only. Or,

alternatively they are those congregations that exist as one, but they are uniform, and they don't welcome anyone who is different. They may *say* they welcome them, every congregation says that, but what they really mean is that they welcome people who are like them or who are willing to be just like them. But those congregations will never be faithful to God either. Our triune God is not just Father, Son and Spirit, but is a God who is so united in love that it is simply impossible to talk about any of the three persons of the trinity without talking about the God who is also one.

Well, maybe next Trinity Sunday I will give you a half an hour sermon with all kinds of logical gymnastics on how it is possible for three can be one and one can be three. But I am not going to leave you with that today. For today and until Trinity Sunday next year, I leave you to reflect on this. What kind of God do we worship here at Northminster? What kind of God do we paint a picture of in our worship? Do we paint a picture of an impoverished version of God, a God who is Father alone, Son alone or Spirit alone? Do we worship a God who is three but divided? The God who cares deeply about this world he created and all its needs, the God who sent Christ to die for our sins so that we might be saved for eternal life, and the God who cares for our emotional needs just as much as to our intellectual needs, and the God who does all these things in unity and perfect harmony. That is the true God, the real God, and it is that God which Trinity Sunday is all about.