

Sermon Notes: June 4, 2023 **Focus:** Trinity Sunday [Lectionary Readings](#)

I took a break from notes in the Easter season. This may be an ill advised re-debut, because this Sunday, Trinity Sunday, is the most theologically heavy Sunday of the year. The tired joke of any seminary is that Trinity is the busiest Sunday for second year students (only seminarians are picked to preach on this Sunday).

In my sermon, I want the Trinity to actually mean something, with that meaning inspiring you to love more deeply. I don't care as much about you thinking deep thoughts as finding ways to act deeply. So many sermons, mine included, say that Trinity is about love and relationship (true, but super vague). May we be able to see the trinity that we can practice in our own lives - treating people with equity; not insisting that we are the most important person in the room; and living in such a way where there is abundance for all. All this fluffy stuff is based on a historical framework of centuries of church practice and thought.

So, for the sermon notes, you get a very brief, very partial synopsis of modern and ancient understanding about the essential nature of the "Godhead." I hope you enjoy the heavy stuff and maybe also be 'fluffily' inspired to love more in the world.

Modern groups, many of which are non-Trinitarian

Judaism Jewish theologians argue that the Shema, the fundamental Jewish prayer affirming the oneness of God, is distinct from the idea of a triune God. They emphasize monotheism without any plurality in the Godhead.

Jehovah's Witnesses reject the Trinity, teaching that Jesus is a created being, and the Holy Spirit is not a separate person, but rather an impersonal force.

Oneness Pentecostals believe in the deity of Jesus Christ but reject the idea of three distinct persons in the Godhead. They assert that God exists as one entity who has manifested Godself in different modes throughout history (One God, different faces) There are a substantial number of megachurches that are quietly non-Trinitarian. Oneness is the modern version of *Sabellianism* (see ancient section)

Islam adheres to the concept of monotheism (tawhid) and rejects the Trinity. Muslims consider the Trinity as a form of polytheism. Islamic theologians argue that the Qur'an explicitly states the oneness of God, and that Jesus is a prophet, not divine.

Progressive Christianity (big umbrella, I know) often reinterprets the Trinity symbolically or metaphorically, focusing on its conceptual or ethical implications rather than literal existence. They may view it as a poetic expression of unity, diversity, and community within the divine. I think this is a good approach, with the huge caveat: If the Trinity is just warm smiles divorced from history, it makes a tepid, weak tea.

Academic theology sees philosophical and cultural influences, rather than being explicitly taught in the New Testament. Others, like myself, resonant with social or relational models of the Trinity (what does it *mean* for how we practice love?)

Episcopal Church I guess the answer depends on what Episcopalian you ask, but generally our spirituality, liturgy, prayers, and sermons are Trinitarian..."Blessed be God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit..."

Ancient Ideas

These historically located ideas below have often been labeled *heresy* by church leaders. However, I am finding it more helpful to think that the development of the Trinity is like a well meaning hiker who keeps finding interesting trails. Sometimes she falls in a ravine and sometimes she gets a really majestic view, but she does not stop hiking. There is also an obvious truth worth stating: The Bible does not explicitly lay out a Trinitarian worldview, therefore, lots of different ideas about the Godhead abound over time. I am only naming a few in interest of brevity.

Sabellianism The Trinity is expressed in different “modes.” Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not distinct, but rather different faces of God. For example -- I am a husband to my wife, a priest to the church, and father to my kids. I have heard more than one Episcopalian sermon lean this way as well as many megachurches (see note about Oneness Pentecostals above).

Tritheism Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three distinct Gods. I don't know Christians who think like this, but this is how Islam sometimes imagines Christian thinking.

Arianism The preexistent Christ was the best of God's creation but not fully divine. The Arian controversy was huge by the 4th Century and with rise of Islam, Arian-leaning Christians converted in the 7th Century.

Don't think Hitler and Aryan nation. Hitler was a prolific cultural thief who built a Third Reich mythology on many disparate histories. For example, he co-opted the swastika from the Indian subcontinent. Aryan does **not** equal Arianism.

Ebionitism Purely human Jesus: but he was a great preacher and miracle worker. It was an early school of thought during the rise of Christianity, but not much is known about their history. Many progressive churches lean in this direction.

Adoptionism Jesus was born human and “adopted” as divine. This happened at baptism or at his resurrection. Not popular either, but it does show up occasionally.

Docetism Jesus only appeared human. Jesus was an all-powerful God wearing a skin suit to hide his glory. Some versions taught that Jesus' divinity left him, with only a shell of skin and bones at the crucifixion. Modern docetism leans on the Christ myth theory. In that understanding, Jesus is an amazing metaphor. Jesus might not have even existed, but embodies an important myth that is shared across cultures. (History is just a skin suit for this all powerful metaphor). A modern, skeptical Docetism would argue that Christ, Krishna, Mithra are solely one archetypal myth.

So that's a lot. Just remember, it is complicated. If my writing helps you love and relate better, then thanks be to God: the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sustainer. I hope your theology serves you well while you treat people equitably and lovingly. May the Trinity help you give your best to the world each day.

Todd