

Trinity Sunday: “The Children of God”

Romans 8:12-17

CHARLIE BERTHOUD | SERMON FOR SUNDAY, MAY 30, 2021

I'd like to be just a little bit heretical today. It's Trinity Sunday, when we give thanks for our trinitarian God—one God in three persons—so you might expect things in threes. But I'd like to examine four different ways we might approach Trinity Sunday. It's like four different stages of celebrating Trinity Sunday.

In Stage One, it's simple and clear. The church calendar says it's Trinity Sunday, so that's what it is. We realize Trinity Sunday is the day we celebrate God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We sing “Holy, Holy, Holy, God in three persons, blessed Trinity.” That's who God is according to the church, and we're good with it.

In Stage Two, we want to learn about the Trinity, we want to analyze the history and theology. We look for Bible verses about the Trinity and we realize there aren't too many. Three of the best known are:

- Jesus said, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28.19-20)
- Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” (Luke 3.21-22)
- The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you. (2 Corinthians 13.13)

We look into the history and realize the early church wrestled with the

doctrine of Trinity all the way through the fourth century at the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople.

We learn about St. Augustine's trinitarian formulation: the lover, the beloved, and the love.

We think about our three major holidays: God with us at Christmas. God for us at Easter. God in us at Pentecost.

And maybe in Stage Two we ponder alternative imagery that some contemporary theologians have offered:¹

- Overflowing Font, Living Water, Flowing River
- Sun, Light, and Burning Ray
- Rock, Cornerstone, and Temple
- Speaker, Word, and Breath
- Compassionate Mother, Beloved Child, and Life-giving Womb

Some of us are a little uncomfortable and some of us think these images are really cool and engaging and helpful.

In Stage Three of our reflection on the Trinity, the questions continue. Some of us might recognize that we gravitate much more to one person of the Trinity and pretty much ignore the other two. Some Christians (including a lot of Presbyterians) have a general sense of God as Father, or Parent, and experience God in a general and polite and somewhat distant way. Some Christians are very focused on Jesus, on his teachings, on his life, death, and resurrection. And some Christians are very focused on the Holy Spirit, the God who empowers us to speak and do great things.

And in Stage Three, we start to ask "Hey wait a minute... Does this make sense? Is this business about one God in three persons really true?"

We're uncomfortable with maleness of Father and Son and think about the patriarchal history of the church. We wrestle with the understanding

¹ <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/resource/trinity-gods-love-overflowing/>

of the Trinity and the nature of God, and we're not sure what we believe. Then in Stage Four, we acknowledge the doubts, and make peace with the uncertainty, and embrace the mystery of God. We're not sure we can understand everything about God as Trinity, and we know we can't scientifically prove anything about the trinitarian nature of God, or about God for that matter, but we're OK with that.

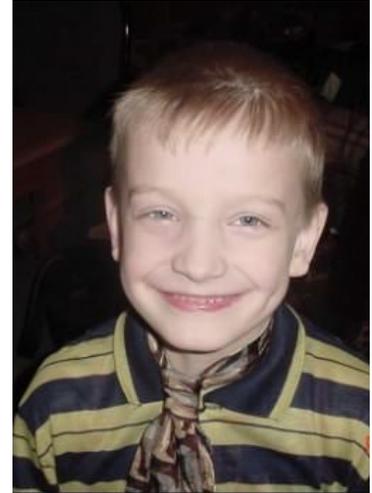
We say with faith and confidence: "I believe in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." We experience God as creator, redeemer, and sustainer. We embrace God as the lover, the beloved, and the love. And because of this belief, this experience, we do our best to live as new people, trying to do God's will.

And ironically, Stage Four of understanding the Trinity brings us back to Stage One, where we sing "Holy, holy, holy, God in three persons, blessed Trinity."

Our scripture reading for this Trinity Sunday comes from the lectionary, the three-year cycle of readings for the church year. With the focus on living by the Spirit, this reading makes a good follow-up to Pentecost Sunday. And with reference to the Father and the Son, it's a good reflection for Trinity Sunday. Listen for God's word from Romans 8:

¹² So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— ¹³ for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵ For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" ¹⁶ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

A month or two ago, I reconnected with a college friend named Ken. We were on the swim team together. On his Facebook page he has pictures of his son, who just graduated from college. The son is wearing a necktie. In other pictures, Ken is wearing the same tie. I scrolled back to get the story.



In 2005 Ken and his wife went to Russia with the hope of adopting a 7 year-old boy. They met him and felt a sense of love. Ken was wearing the tie. His future son had never seen a necktie, so Ken let him try it on.

Over the next couple of days, the boy didn't take off the tie. And two months later when the adoption was finalized, he had the tie on. Over the past 16 years, the tie has remained in the family as a symbol of love that binds them together. At graduation, Dad was proudly wearing the tie.

The reading from Romans has a simple and profound affirmation that adopted into the family of God, we are called to become children of God. We are brought into the family intentionally, deliberately, purposefully—surrounded by a loving God, a God who we know as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

If God really is The Lover, the Beloved, and the Love, then we need to learn the ways of love to be part of the family.

The challenge for us is learning how to live as children of God. I invite us to think about three situations or three contexts in which we can be striving to live as the beloved children of God.

1. In our families. We are emerging from a long period of isolation and many of us haven't seen extended families for months. My social media feed is filled with pictures of family reunions, along with weddings and funerals and other commemorations that are

happening after being postponed. As we come together with our siblings and cousins and parents and children and everyone else, we may have forgotten how to interact with each other, how to be kind and patient with each other, how to love each other. As we approach our family gatherings, we might need to be prayerful, to stay connected to God and God's love, so that we can share that love with our families. Before getting together for a holiday picnic or a family wedding, you might need to pray and ask God for strength to be patient, to be kind, to be loving, so that we can faithfully be children of God.

2. A second situation where we need to keep learning to become the beloved children of God is in our conversations and interactions about the issues of the day. Together in our nation we have very different opinions about politics and politicians, and about a variety of controversial topics. It's OK to have different opinions, and it's OK to have strong convictions, but it's not OK to be cynical, snarky, arrogant, and mean. Sadly, that's happened, even within our wonderful church community. I spent time this week with several members who could be called political minorities here in the Madison area, and at times they have felt that their convictions and political opinions have been mocked and derided at church gatherings. They have felt unwelcomed and unrepresented in church functions. Friends, we can do better. We are called to be the beloved children of God.
3. And a third situation where we can grow more fully into our calling as beloved children of God is with race relations. Our newsfeed is full of racial tensions and conflict and violence. At the mere mention of the topic, some of us get angry, some of us get defensive, some of us get weary.

If you're tired of hearing about racism, imagine how tired some people are of experiencing it...

But this is a topic we need to continue to wrestle with. There is a popular

meme circulating these days and one variation says: Tired of hearing about racism? Imagine having to experience it.

This weekend marks the one hundredth anniversary of the Tulsa Race Riots. In 1921, after a Black boy bumped into a White girl, she screamed and he ran, and a brutal riot began. The result was hundreds of people dead and over a thousand homes and businesses destroyed. Black people in Tulsa had had a great deal of economic success—so much so that one particular area was known as Black Wall Street.

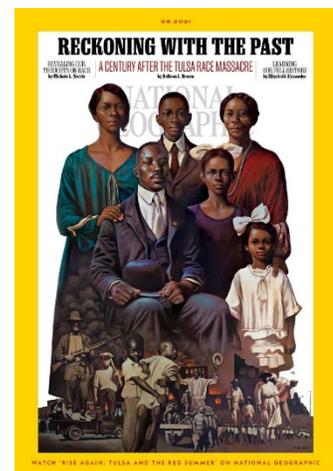


I've been to Tulsa once in my life, and I walked around the Greenwood neighborhood where this happened with a heavy sense of sadness. At a memorial park there is a three-sided statue with images of HOSTILITY, HUMILIATION, and HOPE. Most of us never heard anything about this in high school history class.

In the most recent issue of National Geographic, there is a long and hard-to-read article about the riots. The violence was grotesque, and the way the event has been ignored is shameful.

One particularly insidious thing about the riot was the massive loss of generational wealth.

Prosperous stores, restaurants, and businesses were totally destroyed, losses were huge, and insurance companies denied claims.



The National Geographic article says that over \$610 billion in

generational wealth (in today's dollars) was lost—a staggering amount of lost money, which is hard to appreciate for those of us born into stable and prosperous economic situations.

In the spirit of trying to live into our calling as children of God, and recognizing the call of Jesus to love one another and to work for God's Kingdom here on earth, I have an invitation for you. Over the next few days of the 100th anniversary of the Tulsa riots, I invite you to spend a minimum of ten minutes learning about the Tulsa race riot this weekend. There are numerous TV specials on, and there are plenty of articles around. Spend ten minutes—or more—watching, reading, praying. We close our worship service today singing “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” often called the Black National Anthem. It's a song of faith which we can sing through the lens of tragic events like the Tulsa race riots of 1921, asking God of our weary years and silent tears to keep us forever on the path to liberty.

By the love of God—the God of tradition and mystery that we experience as Father, Son, and Spirit—we are adopted into the family of God, as children of God. Day by day, we encourage each other, as we learn how to be faithful members of that family and to love one another. Amen.