

**Sermon**  
June 12, 2022

*Scrapping the Trinity*  
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Today is Holy Trinity Sunday, the only festival day we devote to a teaching of the church rather than an event in the life of Christ or the tradition that followed in his name.

As a theologian, Holy Trinity Sunday is the one Sunday of the year where I get to open my toy box and share with you what's inside. Instead of preaching on prophets or parables, I get to peak my head through the clouds and gaze with you at heavenly abstractions! I get to do theology. I get to talk about God.

For today's message, therefore, I planned to interpret what it means to say that God is three-in-one and one-in-three by comparing the Trinity with quantum physics. Both speak the language of paradox. Quantum physics tells us that at the most basic, microscopic level of physical objects like quarks or electrons exist as waves and particles simultaneously. Scientists refer to this as the "wave-particle duality."

Upon comparison, when we speak of the Trinity, we likewise point to a duality within God. On the one hand, God possesses three centers of personal distinction (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). At the same time, each of these "persons" reside in matrix of love. This makes the Trinity a paradox too, a "relationship-person duality." We even have a name for this relationship.

We call it love (see 1 John 4:8).

Love requires a plurality of "persons" to exist even as these "persons" are bound to each other in the oneness of their relationship. This "dance," to quote the title of our Gathering Hymn (at the 10:30 service), makes God three-in-one and one-in-three.

One of my favorite descriptions of the Trinity comes to us from Michael Himes, a Roman Catholic priest and emeritus professor of Boston College: "I think I can say, without too great an exaggeration, that the entire doctrine of the Trinity is an enormous [explanation or interpretation of] that phrase in the First Letter of John that God is [self-giving love]. From that metaphor spins out the whole of Trinitarian theology" ("Living Conversation" in *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*, p. 3).

### **An Important Accent**

In my plan to preach on the Trinity, and in keeping with Himes' observation that God is fundamentally self-giving love, which the Trinity symbolizes, I would have added a little nuance to my description.

You recall my reference to the “wave-particle duality” of quantum physics. An electron exhibits properties of both. It can appear like a wave of energy. At the same time, it resembles a particle or “thing.” By placing “wave” in front of “particle,” which I did earlier, however, the accent falls on the primacy of relationship.

Are you confused? If so, a definition might help. The word “electron” is simply a combination of the words electric and ion. Notice which comes first. Linguistically, at least, the answer is clear: the wave, the pattern, the buzzing and whirling of electricity, ever so slightly precedes the “thing,” the particle, the ion.

The same, I would argue, is true of the Trinity. If we start with three “persons,” we turn God into a bizarre constellation of three separate beings. This leads us to raise non-sensical questions like how three separate beings can somehow be the same being, after which we shrug our shoulders and chalk it up to mystery.

But 1 John 4:8 offers us a different point of departure. It says not that God is three persons who happen to be in love, but that God *is* love. This means that the relationship that exists between the “persons” of the Trinity is primary.

When speaking of the Trinity, in other words, we should start with the communion of love, the dance, the buzzing and whirling of electricity that exists between the persons rather than as the persons themselves.

Are you still confused? Consider Yahweh, the most common name for God in the Old Testament. As Rabbi Rami Shapiro explains, “*YHVH* isn’t a noun, but a verb ... *YHVH* is an activity, *be-ing* itself rather than a being or even a supreme being. To borrow from Saint Paul in the book of Acts, ‘God is that in whom we live and move and have our being’ (17:28)” (*Embracing the Divine Feminine*, p. 18; italics original).

The twentieth century theologian Karl Barth expresses the same idea. Because God is fundamentally an activity, he writes, speaking of God is “like trying to follow *a bird in flight* with your eye. The living God is always on the move” (Peter Bolt, “Theological Education: Following a Bird in Flight,” accessed 6/8/22; italics original).

Speaking of God, I would have concluded, allows us to resist the temptation of pinning God down, of reducing God to an entity or being whose existence is determined by the greater whole of reality rather than being the eternal *rehearsal of love* that gives rise to physical reality as its deepest source and groundless ground.

What a sermon that would have been: an unfettered, no-holds-barred reflection on the nature of the Triune God in conversation with quantum physics. During the coffee hour that followed, we could have talked about the implications, how the similarity between quantum physics and trinitarian theology proves that science

and religion can work in tandem, how they are two swords that should never cross (Martin Marty).

But then I read Romans 5:1-5, our second reading for today, and I realized I had to scrap the Trinity – or at least, my attempt at describing it.

### **My Problem with Paul**

Paul speaks often of suffering. In 2 Corinthians 12:3, for example, he talks about having a spiritual experience where he was “caught up into paradise” and “heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.” The experience unfortunately came with a price. To keep him humble, Paul says he received a thorn in the flesh from a messenger of Satan to torment him (1 Cor. 12:7).

We do not know the nature of the thorn in the flesh afflicting Paul. It could have been epilepsy. It could have been malaria. It even could have been another follower of Christ Paul encountered in his ministry. We do, however, know the cause. Paul attributes it to Satan, although God plays a role too. After begging God to remove the thorn, God replies, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:8).

Suffering, Paul implies, has a purpose. It compels the great Apostle to rely on God’s power rather than his own. Out of this power, Paul declares he can do “all things through him who strengthens me” (Phil. 2:13). God allowed the thorn Satan had delivered to Paul’s flesh to linger *for a reason*.

The conviction that suffering has a purpose behind it appears as well in Romans 5:1-5, our second reading for today. Here Paul maintains that it produces endurance which builds character and ultimately leads to hope. Suffering teaches us lessons. That which does not kill us makes us stronger (Friedrich Nietzsche).

I have no doubt that suffering can do these things. As a boy I learned from my constant struggle with life-threatening asthma never to give up, to fight, and that quality of my character has served me well as an adult. My problem with Paul is that not *all* forms of suffering improve our character or make us better people. Sometimes suffering can bring us to our knees. Sometimes it can destroy us.

Years ago, when I was a student pastor in rural Minnesota, I met a man named Mark. He and his parents attended the church where I served. Shortly after I arrived, Mark told me the story of how his brother died three years earlier in a motorcycle accident.

“What has that been like for you?” I remember asking. I will never forget his reply.

“For me,” he said, “it used to be here.” He raised his hands parallel to his shoulders, gesturing to the space in front of him. “Now,” he added, “it’s here” as he pointed to his side, as if his brother was standing next to him and facing me as

Mark did. Silence followed. “For my parents,” he continued, “it will always be here in front of them, never to their side as it has become for me.”

Mark taught me something then that I will never forget: not all forms of suffering are redemptive. Yes, suffering can sometimes bring about the good by making us into better people. But it can also destroy us, as the death of Mark’s brother did to his parents.

I wish, therefore, that Paul had qualified his observation simply by saying that suffering *can* produce within us greater endurance or better character. But Paul did not have the luxury of carefully nuancing everything he wrote. His letters appeared in the midst of persecution, the kind under Nero that would ultimately lead to his own demise.

Yet there is something Paul wrote that we can change, not because we disagree with Paul but due to a common mistranslation of a subsequent passage in Romans as evident in the majority of English Bibles.

### **Amid All Things**

In Romans 8:28, Paul offers what seems to be the definitive explanation of suffering. “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God,” he writes, “who are called according to his purpose. Whatever trials we endure ostensibly come from God. He works in a hidden way. We may not understand why we suffer, but we should trust that God has a plan, that everything happens for a reason, that “all things work together for good.”

Whatever happens in life does so, in other words, according to God’s mysterious and inscrutable will. Faith, in turn, involves submitting to whatever happens no matter how bad, harmful, or hurtful.

The oldest copy we have of Romans, however, says something different! Instead of indicating that God makes “all things work together for good,” it says, “in all things God works for the good.” Paul, in other words, “means not that all circumstances in this life are good for us . . . but that amid *all* these *things* God’s purpose prevails” (*New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Rom. 28, n. 28-30).

God, it turns out, is not the one who causes us to suffer for some kind of deeper or mysterious reason. God is the power that works through our trials as He did through the cross, bringing whenever possible new life out of death, glory out of pain, and healing out of misery. These things — life, glory, healing — come from God. Amid all things God works for the good.

### **The Good News**

Dear Friends in Christ, over the years I have seen more than a few of you experience non-redemptive suffering. I have been with you as you have laid to rest

spouses, siblings, parents, and children. In moments like these, I have no words except to say, in concert with the oldest copy we have of Romans, that their suffering and yours was not from God. You weren't being taught a lesson, even though you may have learned a lesson through it. You weren't being strengthened in character, even though you may have developed character because of it. You weren't being forced to submit to God's will, even though you may have encountered God's presence amidst it.

If God *is* love, the dance, the buzzing and whirling of electricity that exists between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then sure, whatever you gained from your suffering comes from God. But God certainly never caused it. The gospel for non-redemptive suffering is that when nothing good comes out of the suffering we endure, God nevertheless remains with us "amid all circumstances." As pure love, God never leaves us alone, even if God cannot bandage all of our wounds.

Today, let us commemorate the One-in-Three and Three-in-One by remembering who and what this God is: love, the secret power made manifest in and through the resurrection that cannot be conquered in life, even when life (or rather suffering) feels like it has conquered us.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.