

John 1:1–3 (NIV)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was with God in the beginning. ³Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

Matthew 28:18–20 (NIV)

¹⁸Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Ephesians 4:1–6 (NIV)

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ²Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

1 John 4:16-21 (NRSV)

^{16b}God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. ¹⁷Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹We love because he first loved us. ²⁰Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. ²¹The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

God is Three and One. So we proclaim, but what do we really believe . . . and live?

Suppose someone came up to you and asked you to tell them about God, to describe God to them. Where would you begin? With an adjective? A story perhaps? What words would sum up the essential characteristics of God? What would you most want them to know?

Pause before you answer, for you’ll find yourself on one path or another. For example, you might begin with the simple and very true statement, “God is great.” You would probably soon find yourself talking about God’s creation of the cosmos and his control of it. Or you might begin with “God is good” and launch into a discussion of good and evil, morality and ethics.

But if Jesus is the *full* revelation of God (and you are answering these God-questions as a Christian), then how does Jesus’ incarnation reveal to us God’s greatness or even his goodness? You probably don’t need the baby Jesus to know that God is great or to know that God is good, for there is ample evidence in the Hebrew Scriptures to show both of those statements are true. Further, God’s greatness and goodness are themes shared by all the monotheistic religions.

What is it that we Christians have to say about God that is unique and gets to the very essence of God? What is it that we know about God that we could not know without Jesus?

The apostle John takes us right to the heart of the matter with the simple statement, “God is love.” (see the above passage from 1 John) Note that he doesn’t say, “God loves.” A true statement but not unique to Christianity. John writes that God *IS* love. That in God’s very being, God *is* love, God is inherently relational – three persons who love and are loved in a way and to a depth you and I cannot even imagine. This is no mere sentiment, like you might find on a blog or a bumper sticker – this is who God really is, revealed to us in the truth of Jesus. This is a statement about God that I don’t think you could ever really know without the incarnation, from the crib to the cross.

Jesus, fully human and fully divine, reveals to us that God is inherently relational, one God existing as three persons, each of whom is fully and completely God though none are all of God. The three -- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit -- are not simply three parts of a whole. Each *is* the whole though not all of it.

The word "Trinity" is composed of "tri" and "unity" – triunity. But some of the oneness is lost when we shrink it to "trinity." It would be better if we used Triunity or spoke of the Triune God, for the best we can do is to proclaim that there is one and only one God, who exists in unity and oneness as three persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The doctrine of the Trinity expresses God's "three-in-oneness." But, really, how can this be – three and one? Why is this not just some sort of verbal mumbo-jumbo?

Augustine got it about right when he wrote that "whoever denies the Trinity is in danger of losing his salvation; whoever tries to understand the Trinity is in danger of losing his mind." That about sums it up.

So, how did the Christians ever find their way to such a profound and mysterious affirmation about God?

The Living God – personal and triune

When Jesus was a very young boy, he would have been taught to recite the Shema, a Jewish



The Fleur-de-lis

The fleur-de-lis is in our own Rose Window. It is one of many symbols that try to convey our proclamation that God is triune – one and three. Here, there is one flower with three petals. We might have a symbol with three overlapping and interlocking rings. We might have a triangle enclosed by a circle or a circle enclosed by a triangle. Any of these symbols would suffice . . . *and none of them.*

We must remember that all attempts to describe the Trinity in symbols or in words fall short of the mysteries of God. We cannot fully explain how it is that there is one God and yet three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Yet we do proclaim just that! The Father is fully and completely God, but not all of God. Jesus is fully and completely God, but not all of God. The Holy Spirit is fully and completely God, but not all of God. The three are not to be ranked. They are not simply different manifestations of God at different times. God is truly three and one.

prayer built on a verse from Deuteronomy:

"Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord alone."¹ As a devout Jew, Jesus would have recited this prayer morning and evening. The Shema was akin to a battle cry of oppressed Israel, who had endured centuries of foreign domination. Despite this domination, the Jews of Jesus' day remained fiercely monotheistic, making them unique in the ancient world.

Despite the pantheons of gods offered up by competing religions, the Jews insisted that there was one, and only one, God – YHWH -- who had created all that there is and had chosen Israel to be the means of creation's renewal. For a decade after Jesus, all the believers in Jesus were Jews, just as Jesus was a Jew. As such, these early Christians remained fervent monotheists. But this soon posed a significant problem for them. Jesus said and did things that only God could say and do. Who was this Jesus? Could he possibly be God himself? But how could this be if there is only one God?

In the writings of the New Testament, we can see the first Christians coming to understand that God had revealed, through Jesus, his deeper nature. Namely, that while there is unity in God (yes, there is one God!) there is also community, fellowship, and love in God's very being. In many ways, John's gospel is written to convince readers that Jesus is fully God. From this beginning, Christians came to believe and proclaim that God is triune – one God, three persons².

¹ This verse from Deuteronomy (the fifth book of the Old Testament) can be translated as "the Lord is one"

² We use "persons," but it too is misleading – causing us to see the threeness much more than the oneness that is God. Early theologians sometimes used "subsistence" rather than "person," three "subsistences," Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This seems to me like a theologian's solution – not much help to the rest of us!

Without question, for many Christians the whole notion of the Trinity is one of the most perplexing and seemingly irrelevant doctrines of the faith. Though we might affirm a statement something like this, “We believe in one God, who has always known himself as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,³” it can be pretty hard for us to see how this makes much sense or how it matters to our lives as Christians. Yet, our belief in a personal, triune God is foundational to all that makes Christianity unique among the world’s major religions.

God is love

We proclaim that there is one God consisting of three persons who have always been, are now, and always shall be a loving community of three, the Trinity. This truth about God makes John’s statement, “God is love,” not mere sentiment, but a concrete statement of God’s being. After all, did John mean that God loves more than anyone? Or that God loves without ceasing? Or perhaps that God loves truly? All this is accurate, but it isn’t the same thing as saying that God *is* love. The simple statement “God is love,” seems almost nonsensical. Love must have an object. We love something or we love someone. How could any single person, in isolation, *be* love?

However, when we proclaim that God is unity in three persons, then the statement that God *is* love makes perfect sense. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit have always been, are now, and always will be in loving relationship with one another. God *is* love because God is inherently relational. The loving relationships among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit form the basis of God’s very essence. The three persons of the Godhead⁴ live in eternal community, in a loving community of three persons. Indeed, it is from God’s love that we learn the true meaning of love. As John writes: “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another” (1 John 3:16). The triune God is both lover and beloved in one God.

This is where John Wesley’s personal theology and, hence, United Methodist beliefs begin: “God is love.” In the lyrics of Charles Wesley, John’s brother: “Love divine all loves excelling, joy of heaven, to earth come down.”

The Wesley brothers understood that it is love and grace that define God. Grace is simply love in action. The cross, the sacrifice and faithfulness it embodied, takes us to the heart, the essence, of God. As Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians: “God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places . . . For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” (from 2:4-8).

But if this is central to our faith, help me to understand. Three and one?

I’ve read many attempts to explain the nature of the Trinity in words. All far short, some pretty far short. The egg/yolk/eggwhite/eggshell and steam/water/ice analogies that we all heard in Sunday Scholl are more harmful than helpful. The best analogy I’ve encountered is from Jeremy Begbie, a theologian at Duke Seminary and a classically-trained pianist, to whose writings I was introduced by Arthur. Begbie invites us to analogize God’s three-in-oneness as three musical notes comprising a single chord – as on a piano.

A musical chord is a harmonic set of three or more notes that is heard as if sounding as one. The most common is a triad, for example, the first, third and fifth notes of a given musical scale. The chord of C major is composed of the notes C (the root of the chord), E (the third from the root) and G (the fifth from the root). Each individual note is ‘a sound’,

³ In the UMC, we say this much more formally: “There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body or parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the maker and preserver of all things, both visible and invisible. And in the unity of this Godhead there are three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.” This is from our Articles of Religion in the UMC Book of Discipline. These Articles were adopted in 1804.

⁴ Yet another way to express God’s unity-in-threeness. You’ll find that people use many words and images in the effort to express the unity and relationality of God. Most of these efforts are helpful, but none are complete or wholly sufficient. If you think that you’ve got the mysteries of the Trinity all figured out, you are wrong!

and all three notes played together are likewise 'a sound'. Hence a chord is essentially three sounds in one sound, or one sound essentially composed of three different sounds (each of which has an individual identity as well as a corporate identity). By analogy, God is three divine persons in one divine personal being, or one divine personal being essentially composed of three divine persons. Further, when you strike the "C" string on a piano and allow it to resonance, the "E" string and the "G" string resonate as well. Each note of the chord dwells in the other notes at all times. Moreover, when middle C (the root of the chord) is played it 'fills' the entire 'heard space'. When the E above middle C is played at the same time, that second note simultaneously 'fills' the whole of the 'heard space'; yet one can still hear both notes distinctly. When the G above middle C is added as well, a complete chord exists; one sound composed of three distinct sounds. Begbie writes:

"What could be more apt than to speak of the Trinity as a three-note-resonance of life, mutually indwelling, without mutual exclusion and yet without merger, each occupying the same 'space,' yet recognizably and irreducibly distinct, mutually enhancing and establishing each other? To speak of three strings mutually resonating instantly introduces a dynamism ... far truer to the trinitarian, living God of the New Testament."

Ok . . . that helps . . . but what are some ways I could go wrong here?

There are some classical mistakes people have made when contemplating the Trinity. Peter Enns introduces us to a few:

Tri-theism. In early church history men such as John Ascunages and John Philoponus taught that there were three who were God but they were only related in a loose association as, for example, Peter, James, and John were as disciples. The error of this teaching was that its proponents abandoned the unity within the Trinity with the result that they taught there were three Gods rather than three Persons within one Godhead.

Sabellianism or Modalism. This teaching, originated by Sabellius (c. A.D. 200), erred in the opposite from that of Tri-theism. Although Sabellius spoke of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, he understood all three as simply three modes of existence or three manifestations of one God. The teaching is thus also known as modalism because it views one God who variously manifests Himself in three modes of existence: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Arianism. Arian doctrine [which we looked at last week] had its roots in Tertullian, who subordinated the Son to the Father. Origen carried Tertullian's concept further by teaching that the Son was subordinate to the Father "in respect to essence." This ultimately led to Arianism, which denied the deity of Christ. Arius taught that only God was the uncreated One; because Christ was begotten of the Father it meant Christ was created by the Father. According to Arius there was a time when Christ did not exist. Arius and his teaching were condemned at the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325.⁵

We too are relational . . . created for community

Though a C Major chord or the fleur-de-lis focuses us on the nature of God, there is a fundamental truth about humankind here . . . we are created for community. The opening chapters of Genesis tell us that humans are made in God's image. We too are inherently relational; we are made to live in loving relationship with God and one another. It should surprise no one that Jesus reminded the scribe that loving God and neighbor are the two great commandments. We are created to love!

Frankly, it is a mistake to believe that the sole focus of our Christian life is to be our personal relationship with Jesus. Rather, our relationship with Jesus Christ is to be lived out in relationship with others. We are called not to isolation, but to fellowship and communion. We baptize our children into this community of God's people and we are responsible for doing all we can to build it up. Thus, a key test for any congregation, not just St. Andrew, is whether others see community in us. Are we inviting? Are we welcoming? Are we involved in the life of St. Andrew or do we just show up for church an hour each week (or every other week!)? This gets to the very heart of the Gospel and is why

⁵ Enns, P. P. (1989). *The Moody handbook of theology* (p. 199). Chicago, IL: Moody Press.

our joyful proclamation of a triune, relational God is such Good News to those who feel isolated and alone. Truly, there is nothing dry or “academic” about our doctrine of the Trinity!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Our proclamation of a triune God has always been fundamental to the Christian faith. Why do you think this is so? Why do you think some Christians find the whole thing pretty irrelevant? In today’s study we saw how our commitment to community is strengthened by our belief in the Trinity. What are some other practical implications of this doctrine? How does it shape our understanding of God and ourselves and our world? Why do you think Christians have always held our belief in the Trinity to be essential?
2. In his book, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, Daniel Migliore reminds us that the history of God’s steadfast love for the world stands at the center of the biblical witness. Migloire offers three affirmations about the doctrine of the Trinity: (1) “to confess that God is triune is to affirm that the eternal life of God is personal life in relationship,” (2) “to confess that God is triune is to affirm that God exists in community,” and (3) “to confess that God is triune is to affirm that the life of God is essentially self-giving love.” Consider each of the three tightly-packed statements. What does Migloire mean? How would you restate these in your own words? What ought to be our response to this trinitarian understanding of God?
3. In the key scripture passage for this week, John writes that “God is love.” Our belief in the Trinity – one God who has always existed in three persons – reveals that God is inherently relational, that God is inherently loving, that God is inherently a loving community of three persons. We, in turn, are created in God’s image. What might this say about the nature of the loving relationships we have with others? To put it another way, when we embrace the image of God within ourselves, how does this affect the way we relate to others?
4. In the New Testament, love is not a feeling or even an idea. It is the concrete expression of Jesus’ self-sacrificial death on the cross. “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for others.” (1 John 3:16) We look to Jesus’ life to see what love really is. True love for God and neighbor is an expression of our repentance, transformation, discipline, and sacrifice. How can Jesus’ example of sacrificial love transform our own notions of what it means to love others? How is your love for others seen in your own concrete actions? How is your love for God seen in your actions? Do we ask enough of ourselves or is our love limited to that for which we can find some extra time and effort in our busy lives?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday Deuteronomy 6:4; Ezekiel 20:5-20 The one true God is the God who saved the Israelites	Tuesday 1 Corinthians 15:20-28; 2 Corinthians 4:4-6 God and Jesus Christ are clearly distinct
Wednesday John 1:1-5 & 14:8-14 John stresses the unity of the Father and Jesus	Thursday John 15:26-27; 16: 4-14 The close relationship between Jesus and the Spirit
Friday 2 Corinthians 13:13; Matthew 28:19; 1 Corinthians 12:4-6 “Trinitarian formulas” in the NT	Weekly Prayer Concerns

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class - now studying Romans

Meets every Monday from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class - now studying 1 Peter

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall on Tuesdays.

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Saints and Sinners: True and Not-So-True Stories of the Pope
An entertaining and enlightening history of the Papacy, from Peter to Gregory to Joan(?) to Francis

Scott's New Book, *Restart: Getting Past Christian-ish*, is available in the St. Andrew bookstore.

Scott Engle and Robert Hasley will be leading a trip to Israel in late October 2014. This will be a land-only trip that will include all the major sites in Israel.

For more information go to www.scottengle.org or email Scott at sengle@standrewumc.org

Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at www.standrewumc.org. Just go to "worship" and then "sermons." You'll find the study with each week's recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at www.scottengle.org

Sermon Notes
