

## ***“Incomprehensibly Understandable”***

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; Romans 5:1-5 (NRSV)

Have you seen the T.V. show, *This Is Us*? It came out a couple years ago and has caught the country’s heart in a way that our hearts need to be caught these days, I think. There’s no glorification of violence or fancy special effects. Just masterful storytelling and writing. Great acting. Enough surprises to keep suspense. Enough familiarity to be recognizable and relatable to our own lives.

*This Is Us* appeals to us because when we watch the characters and their interactions with one another, we get the feeling that they don’t mean “this is us” as in *them*, but rather “this is us” as in *us*.<sup>1</sup>

The show’s trademark is that it pivots back and forth seamlessly from past to present to future. And at its heart, it’s a show about a family—a big messy family. And while not all families are big, all are messy.

The Pearson family began when a white couple who gives birth to triplets, and one dies at birth. Before they leave the hospital, through a strange twist of fate, they end up with a third baby who had been abandoned at the hospital. An African American newborn. He’s added to their clan, and becomes their third child, equal to the others from day one.

The story tells us a lot about who they are and who we are. What the title of the show reminds us of over and over is that who each of them is as a person depends upon their relationships with one another. Each of them is always all of them.<sup>2</sup>

The couple, Jack and Rebecca Pearson, have a fun little routine with their kids that reinforces their being family, and the kids (even when they are older) return to this when they are stressed or grieving or

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<sup>1</sup> George Mason, “This Is Us,” *Sermon preached at Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, TX* on June 11, 2017

(accessed on June 16, 2019 at [https://www.wilshirebc.org/download\\_file/view/4430/](https://www.wilshirebc.org/download_file/view/4430/))

<sup>2</sup> Mason, *ibid*.

in needs of a reminder of their roots.

Jack tells them, *“Deep breaths and, first came ... .”*

Kevin responds, *“Me! And Dad said ... Gee. Then came ... ???”*

*“Me!”* says Kate. *“And Mom said ... “Wee.”*

Jack continues, *“And then came ... ?”*

Randall responds, *“Me!”*

Jack smiles and says, *“That’s 3!”*

They all then knock their chests and chant, *“Big 3.”*

For those who don’t know this family, it’s incomprehensible that these three are triplets...but completely understandable when you see the love their parents have for them and the ways they love and struggle together. They don’t make sense biologically as triplets – but they do make complete sense familial-ly. Their love, and even their family rituals like the “Big 3 Chant” hold their story together – even if, at times, it seems be unraveling.

Well, today is Big 3 Sunday on the church calendar, a time when we celebrate God as the

Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – something that is incomprehensible to our logical minds and yet something that holds our story together in so many meaningful and understandable ways.

The Bible doesn’t explicitly identify God as Triune—the word “trinity” actually does not occur in the Bible.

However, in Scripture we are invited into relationships with:

- 1) the unseen God whom we call Father or Creator and who seems to be outside of ourselves – above us and beyond us...often described by actions of creating, liberating, guiding, judging, etc.
- 2) the seen God whom we call Jesus Christ— the Son of God – who walked this earth and yet who also seems to be beyond time as the Light of the World and the Word Made Flesh...often described by his teachings and miracles and healings and interactions with people, etc.
- 3) and the felt God, whom we call the Holy Spirit – the one who we seem to feel within us and around us, stirring

and moving us still  
today...breath, wind,  
fire...often described by  
sensations and the effect  
these sensations have on  
people moving them to faith  
and transformation, etc.

There are references to all three aspects of the Trinity in Scripture, such as in the passage from Romans we just read where Paul gives us the theological understanding that it is Jesus who puts us in right relationship with God and that through the grace we receive in Jesus – while we will still suffer just as he did – our suffering ultimately leads us to hope because we still have with us today the Holy Spirit who is pouring love into our hearts and connecting us to God and one another.

In Matthew 28 when Jesus gives the Great Commission, he tells believers to “...*go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...*” (Matthew 28:19).

We also read today about Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 8, and how she was present with God

the Creator even before Creation – either as the *Logos* or *Word* that would become Jesus or as a manifestation of the Holy Spirit (depends on your understanding of Wisdom).

And in John 14 Jesus tells his disciples that as he is going to his Father’s house where there are many rooms (and that they will join him there one day too), that he will be sending them an Advocate, the Spirit, to help them and guide them in the days to come.

And there is the really crazy verse in Genesis 1:26 which states “*Then God said, 'Let **us** make man in our image...*” Did God get God’s pronouns mixed up here or is this God stretching our binary categories of how we use pronouns and how we speak of ourselves? Who is this “us?”

Take these or any number of Scriptures – the point is, the Trinity is not just a random, ungrounded theological. It has deep Scriptural roots, even as it is not defined or stated as doctrine in the Bible.

Early Christian theologians and, honestly, the “powers that be” that felt that they needed to settle conflicts over the nature of whether Jesus could be both human and divine, synthesized all the references about the interrelated nature of these three – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and that led us to the doctrine of the Trinity we have today from the 3-4<sup>th</sup> centuries.

In Trinitarian doctrine, God exists as three persons, but is one being, having a single divine nature. The members of the Trinity are distinct yet co-equal and co-eternal, one in essence, nature, power, action, and will. They are separate and yet cannot be separated from one another.<sup>3</sup>

Clear as mud, right?

I came across an Agnus Day cartoon by James Wetzstein that captures the complexities of the Trinity as only humor can:



<sup>3</sup> Accessed on June 16, 2019 at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trinity>.

So what are those finer points?  
Well – it’s complicated.  
Because any time we speak of  
the Trinity we are trying to put  
human words to an  
incomprehensible dimension of  
God. We like logical formulas  
like  $1+1+1=3$ , so we don’t  
know what to do with a formula  
that uses a different kind of  
logic than we’ve been taught  
like  $1+1+1=1$ .

And even the words and images  
we use to describe the Trinity  
can be confusing at times.

We have the usual words like  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but  
sometimes you hear Creator,  
Redeemer and Sustainer; or  
Almighty God, Incarnate Word  
and Holy Comforter. Or even  
something more modern like:  
Womb of Life, Word in Flesh  
and Brooding Spirit?<sup>4</sup>

Or what about this  
contemporary analogy? The  
Father is the light bulb on the  
ceiling; the source of all light;  
the Holy Spirit is the wiring

which connects the Almighty  
with us on earth; and  
Jesus is the light switch; the  
way we activate our connection  
to God.<sup>5</sup>

Others have said that the  
Trinity is like water – it can be  
in liquid form, or gas form  
(steam), or solid form (ice) –  
but it’s all one substance. That  
analogy breaks down of course  
in that in order for water to be  
ice, it cannot also be steam at  
the same time. This is called  
modalism. When we try to say  
the Trinity is three different  
modes of God that God is  
jumping around into all the  
time...like Clark Kent jumping  
in and out of the phone booth to  
become Superman.

Perhaps poets come a bit closer  
to describing the Trinity in  
ways we can understand. Steve  
Collins writes:

three is the magic number  
calling us out of individualism  
insisting on relationship

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<sup>4</sup> Brett Younger, “Trinity Sunday: It’s better than  
‘daylight savings time begins’,” *Baptist News Global*  
(June 12, 2019), accessed on June 16, 2019 at  
[https://baptistnews.com/article/trinity-sunday-its-better-than-daylight-savings-time-begins/?utm\\_source=Baptist+News+Global+Contacts&utm\\_campaign=f11162a7d6-](https://baptistnews.com/article/trinity-sunday-its-better-than-daylight-savings-time-begins/?utm_source=Baptist+News+Global+Contacts&utm_campaign=f11162a7d6-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_05_30_06_48_COPY_01)  
[EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2019\\_05\\_30\\_06\\_48\\_COPY\\_01](https://baptistnews.com/article/trinity-sunday-its-better-than-daylight-savings-time-begins/?utm_source=Baptist+News+Global+Contacts&utm_campaign=f11162a7d6-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_05_30_06_48_COPY_01)

[https://baptistnews.com/article/trinity-sunday-its-better-than-daylight-savings-time-begins/?utm\\_source=Baptist+News+Global+Contacts&utm\\_campaign=f11162a7d6-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2019\\_05\\_30\\_06\\_48\\_COPY\\_01](https://baptistnews.com/article/trinity-sunday-its-better-than-daylight-savings-time-begins/?utm_source=Baptist+News+Global+Contacts&utm_campaign=f11162a7d6-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_05_30_06_48_COPY_01)

<sup>5</sup> Melanie Jean Juneau, “Parables and Images Try to  
Explain the Trinity,” *Joy of Nine9* (June 11, 2017),  
accessed on June 16, 2019 at  
<https://melaniejeanuneau.blog/2017/06/11/parables-and-images-try-to-explain-the-trinity/>.

i to you  
we to another  
trinity seeding networks  
until all the cosmos joins in

one to create  
one to save  
one to sustain

one to author  
one to fight  
one to enliven

one to conceive  
one to die  
one to resurrect

one to plan  
one to act  
one to explain

one's sufficient  
two's company  
three's community...

trinity expose our self-reliance  
trinity break open our  
exclusivity  
trinity seed our joining today<sup>6</sup>

Then there are the hardcore  
theologians.

John Calvin writes: “*To the Father is attributed the beginning of activity and the fountain and wellspring of all things; to the Son, wisdom, counsel, and the ordered disposition of all things; but to the Spirit is assigned the power and efficacy of that activity.*”<sup>7</sup>

Karl Barth explains: “*God is the speaker, without whom there is no word and no meaning; [Jesus is] the Word who is the speaker’s word and the bearer of the meaning; and [the Spirit is] the meaning which is as much the meaning of the speaker as of the word.*”<sup>8</sup>

Confusing, right?

Physicist Niels Bohr perhaps the hit the nail on the head the best when he said, “*God is not only stranger that we think but stranger than we can think.*”<sup>9</sup>

For most of us the hairsplitting intellectual gymnastics of arguments concerning the Trinity seem obscure and maybe even irrelevant or like

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<sup>6</sup> Steve Collins, “Three is the Magic Number,” *Prayer about the Trinity* (May 21, 2012), accessed on June 16, 2019 at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2012/05/prayer-three-is-magic-number.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Younger, *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Younger, *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Richard Rohr, “Trinity: Fathers of the Eastern Church,” *Center for Action and Contemplation* (May 12, 2015), accessed on June 16, 2019 at <https://cac.org/trinity-2015-05-12/>.

it's an impossible endeavor to try and explain it. But I believe it's important to explain it because, *"The doctrine of the Trinity reminds us that there is more to God than we can sing or preach or prove. God is as near as our breath, but not so familiar as to be completely understood. God is beyond time and space, but not so mysterious as to be inaccessible."*<sup>10</sup>

"The Trinity is the understanding that God is at work in an abundance of ways... God is over us as Creator, with us as Christ and in us as Spirit."<sup>11</sup>

And – the "Trinity offers direction on how we should live. If we believe that God created all of the world, then our attitude will be celebration for the beauty of creation and concern for its ongoing care. If we believe that God was in Christ, then we will follow Jesus' example of caring, loving, and serving so much so that we change our lives to follow him...not just make minor adjustments but really our change our attitudes of "me

first" to "we first" – "THIS IS US!". And if we believe that the Spirit is present, then we will look for the ways God is at work.

These are things we can understand about God because they are behavioral. But we'll never quite get to an intellectual understanding that's completely comprehensible. As one person has said, *"Explaining the Trinity is like describing the ocean to someone who has never seen more than a teaspoon of water."*<sup>12</sup>

Often people will ask me, do I have to believe in the Trinity in order to be a Christian?

I have a Trinitarian or Tri-part answer to this question.

First, even though I am a pastor, it is not my prerogative to say what anyone does or does not have to believe in order to be a Christian. I can tell you what I believe to be true about Christianity, but I do not feel that I get to define Christianity for you or anyone.

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<sup>10</sup> Younger, *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Younger, *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Younger, *ibid.*

Second, I believe Jesus wants our full attention and our full hearts, minds, souls, and bodies in how we love God and love others and proclaim the gospel of love. If we are giving ourselves fully to loving God and loving others and asking forgiveness for the ways we have harmed others and ourselves, if we are making our own desires second to what Christ desires for our lives, if we are professing that Jesus is Lord, the One we believe to show us who God is and what God wants for us in the world – then we are doing our best to live as Christians...it's a long process, a cyclical journey, not a linear path or something we can checkmark as complete once we believe the right things like, okay now that I understand these things "now I'm a Christian." Christianity is far more relational than just intellectual. That's the point of the incarnation!

Third, I don't think the Trinity is something we *believe in* as much as it is something that we *experience*.

And this is why I love and embrace the Trinity as my fundamental understanding of

God. Because the Trinity is about relationship. It is a beautiful image to me for the very inner workings of God in Godself to be about relationship with others. Because if we are created in God's image, then that means we are created not only to be in relationship with others, which I believe to be true, but also that we are created to be in relationship with all that is going on within ourselves.

We like to categorize ourselves. Think of personality tests, "I'm an INFJ." Or professions, "I'm an accountant." Or relationships, "I'm a father. A brother. A son. A friend." Or even our hobbies, "I'm a golfer, a skier, a fishermen."

Well, it seems to me that we don't just have one identity throughout our lives – we are always growing and changing. Think about the times you have conversations with yourself in your head (*and I know you do this; don't try to pretend you don't!*)...who are you talking to? Different versions of yourself?

We have the capacity to be in our own minds and bodies



while also speaking and imagining ourselves as something or someone else. We also have the capacity to be kind of like a chameleon – in a good way – to adapt our personalities and conversations and behaviors to fit different social contexts and situations. Sometimes this can be really harmful, especially if we are just adapting ourselves to be what others need us to be. But what if we are adapting as contexts change and it's not a bad thing...but all the ways we are with people are all of our authentic selves...just different manifestations?

Because it's a human analogy – it breaks down when it comes to using that as a direct comparison to God. But to me, there is just something so beautiful about the relationality of God that the Trinity captures. And how it makes our relationship with God exciting and ever-evolving...and how it invites me to see my own inner-workings as more complex and relational than I thought!

Father Richard Rohr writes,

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Rohr, "Trinity: Fathers of the Eastern Church," *Center for Action and Contemplation* (May

*"The Mystery of God as Trinity invites us into full participation with God—a flow, a relationship, a waterwheel of always outpouring love. God is a verb much more than a noun...True Trinitarian theology offers the soul endless creativity—an open horizon... Perhaps much of the weakness of many Christian doctrines and dogmas is that we've tried to understand them with a logical or rational mind instead of through love, prayer, and participation itself..."*

*...In our attempts to explain the Trinitarian mystery, the Western Church overemphasized the individual names—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—but not so much the quality of the relationships between them, which is where all the power and meaning lies! So, let's not spend too much time arguing about the gender of the Three. The real and essential point is how the three "persons" relate to one another: infinite outpouring and infinite receiving."*<sup>13</sup>

The Trinity may not be something we can make sense

12, 2015), accessed on June 16, 2019 at <https://cac.org/trinity-2015-05-12/>.

of with our minds – it is incomprehensible. However, I do feel like we can *understand* the Trinity because we can experience what it is to be in community with one another.

When I was dating, I used to hate the phrase, “*When you know you know*,” but then I have to say, it is true. For all of my questioning and trying to figure out if the people I was dating were right for me...when I started dating Damon...I didn’t have any of those questions. Not that everything was perfect and peachy...but I had this inner sense of this being right. And I can’t logically explain it – we are very different in many ways. But it’s a gut/heart feeling. I don’t know if that whole “when you know you know” thing is true for everyone. I do know it was true for me. And this coming from someone who wanted to be able to figure out love by making a list of “pros” and “cons” and evaluating the relationship and if it made sense, etc. The point being – Love is incomprehensible...but it is understandable...meaning, we know it when we experience it,

even if we can’t fully put that experience into words.

The other beautiful thing I love about the Trinity, is that in my experience as a pastor, I have seen just how many ways people relate to God and pray to God. Some people really need and want God to be their Father – a strong presence in their lives that is providing for them, and has “got them” no matter what (that image of being held in the palm of God’s hand). This is true for many who had a loving Father growing up and others who did not have a Father at all, or even perhaps had an abusive Father. They need God to remind them of their earthly Father who loved them well or to fill the role of Father that they never had or to redeem the role of Father from one who stripped that from them.

Others who have a difficult relationship with their Father, cannot think of God as Father...it is very painful for them. And so they think of God as Mother, as Tender Nurturer and Caregiver, or as Creator, Birther, or Author. Or – perhaps they have a deep inner sense of connecting to God as

Holy Spirit...that movement or sense of aliveness and stirring within themselves.

Some are fully connected to God as Creator through nature and feel the most captivated and in awe of God when in the great outdoors and they think of God as Parent of All Creation.

Others tell me they pray to Jesus as if he is sitting in a chair near next to them or is a close friend. They talk freely and openly to Jesus...they feel they can relate to him.

Personally, when I pray I find great awe and worship in thinking about God as Creator – as so much bigger than me...as one who sees the bigger picture in my life that I can't see. When I'm suffering or struggling, I relate most to Jesus – because I have stories of his sufferings and struggles that I can turn to and find my own. And when I'm needing to feel inspired and uplifted and when I think about the faces of this community, of your faces Calvary, I think of the Holy Spirit...as the one who is the Tie that Binds Us Together as well as the one who cuts all of the things that tie us down so

that we can fly freely and openly to be who God created us to be.

In my discipleship, while Jesus is the One who challenges me out of my comfort zones to risk something big for something good...the Holy Spirit is the one who gives me the gumption to do it...is the One that centers me in my breathing when I'm anxious or afraid or just too busy and need to be still. And God the Creator reminds me it's not all about me, and I really am small in the grand scheme of things and yet I'm "beloved" just as God the Father named Jesus at his baptism as "beloved," I too, bear that name. As do you.

You see, the beauty of the relationality of God as the Trinity is that God is more readily able to be present for us in the ways that we need.

That said, we can also fall into ruts with how we think about God – and I invite you today to think about the part of the Trinity that is hardest for you – the Father part, the Son part, or the Spirit part. Take this week to try and pray to that part of God...to read Scriptures that

speak to that aspect of the Trinity. To see what you can learn about God, and yourself, by expanding your relationship with God in a new way.

And if you are so caught up in whether you believe the Trinity is fact or really the end all be all to how to describe God, or whether it's just a human construct and a limited or exclusionary way of thinking about God, then try to let that go for this week. Just put it on the shelf. It won't go anywhere. With that on the shelf, try this week to not worry about believing in The Trinity and rather try to just experience the beautiful dimensions of the Trinity. Let go of the logical, comprehending part, and seek the understanding and experiencing part.

The Trinity is completely incomprehensible, yes. And, the Trinity is utterly understandable too.

Here's my final illustration for how we have personal experiences that can help us understand how the Trinity can be both One and Community. If

you've ever had an experience of being so utterly connected to others around you – maybe in worship or at a concert or at a sports event even (or maybe even to those who have died...a more mystical connection and sense of presence) – while also being able to recognize in that moment you are your own person and self and not completely absorbed into that group or community or experience...then you've had the experience of being one and being community at the same time. The Trinity. Tri-Unity.

Ultimately, if you hear nothing else today, maybe hear this: the God we worship is to be understood as a relationship of mutual and flowing Love that is shared among the three persons— Creator, Christ, and Spirit – One. “*God alone is God, but God is not a lonely God.*”<sup>14</sup> The Trinity is Love manifested in different and diverse ways to reach as many people as possible and to illustrate as many aspects and dimensions of God as possible. The ultimate point being, I think, that with the Trinity we learn that no dimension of our

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<sup>14</sup> Mason, *ibid.*

lives is not completely  
permeated by God – past,  
present, and future...beyond us,  
among us, and within us.

God is Love. And love is  
always relational. It's not a love  
I can comprehend but I can  
understand it, because I  
experience it and feel it in so  
many ways.

As I often say,  
God is the One who Created us  
all with love;  
the One who came down to  
earth to teach us all how to  
love;  
and the One whose Spirit  
inspires the very love that we  
share through our lives."

That's my understanding of the  
Trinity. What's yours?

Amen.