

WHERE LANGUAGE ENDS

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A sermon preached at Valley Presbyterian Church
in Brookfield, Connecticut
on June 12, 2022

Texts: Romans 5:1-5 & John 16:12-15

Romans 5:1-5

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

John 16:12-15

"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you."

By 1804, Thomas Jefferson had drafted the Declaration of Independence, built Monticello, and was about halfway through his presidency. At that point, most people would be ready to slow down, but not him. He decided that year to take on his most ambitious project of all: re-writing the New Testament.

Jefferson thought there was a lot of stuff in the New Testament that either didn't make sense or was completely unbelievable, and he wanted to cut all that stuff out and create a version of the New Testament that was easier to swallow. And the thing that really bugged him, the thing he wanted to take pair of scissors to the most, was all the stuff about God being Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Jefferson was a true intellectual, a product of the Enlightenment. He was president, not only of the United States, but also of the American Philosophical Society. As far as he was concerned, the idea of the Trinity was pure hogwash, to use the technical term. How could one God exist as three distinct persons? It just didn't add up—literally. God could be one, or God could be three, but God could not be both.

That's how Jefferson saw it, and honestly you can't really blame him. From a rational point of view, the Trinity doesn't make sense. It's illogical. It's un-mathematical. You can't make one plus one plus one equal one, no matter how many times you punch that into a calculator. It just doesn't work.

So if the Trinity is nothing more than a relic of our pre-Enlightenment past, why not get rid of it like Jefferson wanted to do? Why not go back to the theological drawing board and pick a side—either proclaim the singleness of God, and be done with it, or throw in the monotheistic towel and start worshipping three separate gods?

Well, because that whole argument overlooks one thing. The Trinity is not an equation or a theorem and was never meant to be taken that way. It's a revelation of the God we know in Jesus Christ, and it's rooted in passages like the ones we hear today, passages that never once mention the word "trinity" but still speak of God as three distinct persons who act in distinct ways—guiding us into truth; giving us access to grace; pouring love into our hearts; and glorifying each other.

So what do we do with the fact that these passages, and others like them, appear in scripture—passages that point toward a triune God, a God who exists as a community of three? We can't just ignore them. So how do we take them seriously? How do we incorporate them into our theology?

More importantly, perhaps, what do we do with our own experiences of a God who's always loving and accepting, a God who's always seeking us out, a God who's always calling us into relationship, a God who's communal by nature? How do we fit what we know personally into our understanding of who God is?

How do we take all of that information and experience and put it into words—words that don't bring God down to our level; words that don't squeeze God into a little box; words that don't reduce God to a finite thing; words that leave room for God to be God: the Creator of the universe, the Lord of our lives, the Breath of our being.

Those were the big questions Christians were asking in the third and fourth centuries, when they were trying to work out exactly what they believed, and the big answer they came up with eventually was the doctrine of the Trinity. And that's what Jefferson didn't get. He didn't get that the purpose of the doctrine was not to explain a mystery, but to invite people into a mystery. He didn't get that those early Christians weren't simply interested in knowing about God; they wanted to know God.

That's an important distinction, and one we often miss—the distinction between knowing *about* someone and *knowing* someone. If I asked you, "Do you know Joe Biden?" you'd probably say, "Yeah, I know Joe Biden. He's the president. He lives in the White House. He flies around on Air Force One." But then if I said, "Great, can you give him a call and see if he wants to come over for dinner tonight," you'd pretty quickly

realize I wasn't asking, "Do you know *about* Joe Biden." I was asking, "Do you *know* Joe Biden, "as in, *Do you have a relationship with him? Do you hang out together? Are the two of you friends?*"

We often think the point of the Trinity is to know about God—to reduce God to a set of facts and suppositions; to boil God down to an argument that holds up to scrutiny; to make God fit into a logically consistent view that we can wrap our heads around. But what the doctrine really is is poetry, not philosophy, and certainly not mathematics. It's the place where language ends and knowing begins.

To experience God, the One we call Spirit, guiding us into a life of selflessness and joy; to experience God, the One we call Son, walking beside us and picking us up when we fall; to experience God, the One we call Father, welcoming us home when we've wandered away like sheep—that is to finally grasp the Trinity.

I'm going to leave you today with a story, and you might not completely get it. That's okay. I don't completely get it either. But sometimes I think it's good to carry around things we don't completely get and just kind of sit with them for a while. It has a way of stretching our imagination.

Kallistos Ware is an English bishop and a theologian of the Eastern Orthodox Church, and he tells an old Eastern European story about a bishop of a large diocese, who decides one day to visit every single one of his parishes. After spending years on horseback, he thinks he's seen them all, but someone tells him about a tiny chapel on a remote island far out in the sea. So he charts a boat and sets out for the island. Upon landing, he finds it to be a desolate place, inhabited only by three old men. He greets them and immediately begins to question them about the orthodoxy of their faith.

"Tell me," he says, "how do you pray?"

"Well," they answer, "we stand in a circle and hold hands—like this," and the three of them join hands, and together they pray, "You are three, we are three, have mercy upon us."

"No, no, no," the bishop shakes his head. "That'll never do. Don't any of you know the Lord's Prayer?"

"Never heard of it," they shrug. "But please teach it to us, O holy man of God!"

So the bishop spends all afternoon teaching the absent-minded old hermits the Lord's Prayer, and when they finally seem to know it by heart, he says his goodbyes, returns to the boat, and heads back to the mainland, puzzling over this strange encounter.

As the boat sails along, the sun sinks below the horizon, and looking out across the darkening sea, the bishop spots a tiny light coming from the island. The light gets closer and closer, and brighter and brighter, until the bishop can see it's the three old men, holding hands and running on top of the water, their beards flapping in the wind, their faces radiant with the light of Christ.

"Holy man of God!" they yell. "We've forgotten the prayer you taught us! Teach us again so we can pray correctly!"

"On second thought," the bishop says, "I think your prayer must be fine."

You are three, we are three, have mercy upon us. To the holy and undivided Trinity, the Creator, the Christ, and Holy Spirit, one God, be honor and glory, now and forever. Amen.