



PUBLICATIONS--Manna: Food for the Journey of Spirituality

Articles

The Divine Community

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Several weeks ago when Rev. Basil informed me that I would be giving the sermon on June 11, I did not realize at the time that June 11 was Trinity Sunday. Later, when I discovered I would be speaking on Trinity Sunday, and presumably would be expected to talk about the Trinity, I asked his advice on how to approach this very mind-boggling subject. So he told me the story of one minister who opened his sermon on the Trinity as follows: “The doctrine of the Trinity is so mind-boggling and practically incomprehensible that there will be no sermon today!”

To be sure, the doctrine of the Trinity is a mind-boggling concept. Nevertheless, the basic idea can be stated quite easily. Here it is: There is One God, in Three Persons, who are All equal.

Now, that sounds simple enough to say. But in reality, the Trinity is beyond the abilities of our finite minds to understand. If you have trouble comprehending this doctrine, don't think for a moment that you are alone. Suffice it to say that, while God does reveal himself to us in various ways, there is much about God that we do not, even cannot, understand. In that regard, we do well to remember the words of the great Augustine of Hippo: “If you understand it, it's not God.”

Having said all that, here's a question for you: What difference does it make anyway? What does the doctrine of the Trinity have to do with you and me? Actually, it has a lot to do with us, and I hope to show you some of that this morning.

Let me start by giving you my favorite description of God. It's the Apostle John's simple statement that “God is love” (1John 4:8,16). There are those who like to focus on the holiness of God, and there are others who prefer to focus on the sovereignty of God and surely God is both holy and sovereign. Yet for me, a fallen sinner standing in desperate need of God's grace, it is the absolute certainty of God's love that reassures me. If God were not loving, merciful, and forgiving, then the existential philosophers would be right to describe our lives as a cosmic tragedy.

Thankfully, however, our God is a loving God. Yet, for God to be loving, there must be more than one Divine Person in the Godhead. One of the mistaken ideas about God is to think that God is only one Person who acts in three different ways. But that won't do at all. If God were only one Person, then God could not be eternally love—and here's why: because love is relational; in other words, love requires more than one. If God were only one divine Person, then

(continued on page 2)



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The Divine Community Continued...

his love would be merely self-love, and that is a contradiction in terms. Self-love is like the boy who looked into the pool of water and fell in love with his own reflection. That's not love at all; that is narcissism.

Love requires more than one, and since God is love, God must be more than one divine Person. Yet the thought might occur to us that God became a loving God when he created us. But that won't do either, because that would mean that there was a time when God was not love. Yet God is eternally the same. He does not change from one day to the next. God is love, and that love has eternally existed among the Persons of the Trinity. In fact, some theologians think that it is the overflowing love of the Trinity that explains why God created humans beings in the first place. According to Professor Steve Blakemore:

"If God IS love, then the purpose of our lives is to be loved by God, which we are. But further, the purpose of our lives is to open ourselves to the One who is Love and who wants us to know that Love. God made us, in other words, to love us."

I don't know about you, but that kind of theology puts a spring in my step and makes me really glad I got up this morning.

Now consider this: God is love, and we are created in the image of God. Since both those statements are true, then it must follow that we reflect that image best when we love one another.

With that thought in mind, I want to ask you the following question: How is the world around us to know that we are Christians? Is it because we put fish-shaped magnets on the bumper of the family car? Is it because we are against gay marriage and abortion on demand? Is it because we vote against casinos and liquor stores in our neighborhoods? No While all those concerns may be good and proper, they are not the primary means by which the world is to recognize the followers of Jesus Christ. Listen to what Jesus said:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:34-35)

The world around us will know that we are followers of Jesus Christ if we love one another. And we can love one another because we are created in the image of the God who is love. And God is love because God is triune.

(continued on page 3)



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The Divine Community Continued...

Now, let's take that line of thought in a slightly different direction. The Trinity itself provides the model for the Church of Jesus Christ (and bear in mind that everything that I am about to say about the Church applies to the home as well). The unity that God desires in his Church is a reflection of the unity that exist in himself. In the Trinity there are no "rugged individuals," wherein each Person of the Godhead is motivated merely by self-interest or pursues a private agenda. To the contrary, the Persons of the Trinity are mutually interdependent and always act with harmony of purpose. In other words, there is no situation in the Trinity where one Divine Person gets "out-voted" by the other two. As Christians, it is God's desire that our mutual interactions reflect the harmony and singleness of purpose that exist within the Trinity. And the way to safeguard those mutual interactions is to remember Christ's command that we love our neighbor as our selves.

Just for the record, it is at this point that tri-theism breaks down. Tri-theism is the mistaken idea that there are three gods, rather than the correct idea that there is one God in three Persons. If the Godhead were three independent gods, then harmony of purpose could never be a certainty. Can you imagine what it would be like if the Godhead were composed of three independent beings, each pursuing a private agenda? We could never know for sure in which direction the sun would rise tomorrow morning!

But God is not three independent gods. God is one God in Three Persons.

When we say that God is triune, we might say that God is a community of divine Persons. That may sound a bit strange, but when you think about it, the Trinity really is a divine community. And again, that has significance for us who are created in the image of that divine community. It means that we best express that divine image in community.

We know, however, that the image of God within us is marred and defaced. Yet it is through community that God begins to clean up that image and remove the tarnish and dust and dirt that has hidden the divine image within us. Since God is a community of divine Persons, and we are created in his image, we only reach our full potential as human beings in community, whether that community be the Church, the home, or a 12-Step group. It is in this regard that our culture's emphasis on individualism is so misdirected, because it denies a fundamental reality about what it means to be human: that we are truly ourselves only in community.

So many of our wounds and hurts have been received in relationships; and those same wounds can only be healed in relationships. Therefore, if you have been lingering on the sidelines, or, perhaps, acting as a "Lone-Ranger" Christian who thinks all one needs is a Bible, I encourage you to take some risks, to step out in faith, and become more involved in a Church community.

(continued on page 4)



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The Divine Community Continued...

Because it is in community that God will stretch us and grow us and lead us to spiritual heights we could never visit on our own.

So, to sum up what I have said this morning: the doctrine of the Trinity assures us that God is love. In order for God to be eternally love, God must be more than one, because the nature of love requires another. And as beings created in the image of God, we are to reflect that love to one another. Again, the Trinity is a community of divine Persons. Because we are created in the image of the triune God, we become most fully human in the context of community. Therefore, let's remember that the world will know we are Christians if we have love for one another. And we can only express that love within the context of community. As Jesus said, let it be done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

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