

**“God: From Tribal to Triune”  
Sermon by Pastor Tom Warren  
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Today, of course, is a special Sunday, with it being Father’s Day. It is also a special Sunday because, in the liturgical calendar of the church, this is what is called Trinity Sunday. This is a Sunday that has been instituted in the life of the church in order that we might not forget, and perhaps think about, the Trinity-pairing formula of God which I thought I would address today and talk about because the Trinity, and thinking about God and the Trinitarian Father, Son and Holy Ghost construct has, in many ways, been put aside, put on the back burner, or, for some of us, even disregarded. So, let’s spend some time this morning just talking about that construct and why, in fact, that is perhaps important in our faith and life.

I’d like to begin with a story. This story is a true story, and it is about one of my great joys in life which is going to the supermarket. As a little child, and into my late 40s, I have always enjoyed going to the supermarket. Back where I grew up in New York, there was the P&C Market. It was a big grocery store like Food Lion or Harris-Teeter that we have around here. I used to love to go. I think this was partly because this was alone time with my mother. I almost always went with my mom. I think it was also a special time because it was thrilled with all the displays of products, and it was a time when I prayed to God that mom would let me get a box of Lucky Charms for breakfast (which she never did,) and as I got older and wiser, the trips to the supermarket were where I would secretly sneak in boxes of Ho-Hos into the grocery cart, boxes that mom would find only upon checkout time and, by then, was too late. So, I have very fond memories of the grocery store, and to this day I enjoy walking the aisles and sort of looking at what is available there.

At some point in my journeys at the grocery stores (I don’t know if this was in the 80s, early 90s or some other time), I started to notice that there were generic products on the shelves. I particularly remember the generic loaf of bread. It was in a white plastic wrapper with black letters. It was white, plain bread, and it was cheap. It was so boring. It didn’t have the colorful designs. It was not like Wonder bread with the blue and red dots all over it or anything like that. It was generic and it was boring, but generic bread was affordable and usable for lots of people. It didn’t taste that good and its nutritional value was suspect, but if you slapped some peanut butter and jelly on that bread, it worked out okay.

I brought up that imagery of generic products because I think there is a tendency in our world, either consciously or subconsciously, to make God generic, to make God usable for our agendas, and to make God kind of plain, not asking too much of us, but employed for our needs, desires and wants so that God is for our soccer team, our football team, or our baseball team, for our school, and for our church. This God can be used as we see fit. In this move towards the generic, in order to make God generic, we have to ignore certain scriptures, we have to highlight other scriptures, and employ yet other scriptures for our own purposes that are quite distinct from their original meanings, and we all do this all the time. We call it “proof texting”, when we go to one scripture and use it for our agenda.

In this movement to make God generic, one of the casualties of this movement is the very unique Christian concept of the Trinity. The idea of the Trinity is that our one God has three essences, or three components, or three attributes. In traditional language, we talk about the Trinity as Father, Son and Holy Ghost or, in more contemporary language, we talk about the Trinity as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

The Trinitarian formula for God is, of course, the construct. This is a construct for how to think about God that came out from the early Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. and the Council of Constantinople in 381 where there were early, early church meetings, gathering the leadership of what was then the Roman church, and it was an attempt to describe the reality of the living God in conformity with the

gospel story, so when we read that text about Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we are reading a text that is prior to thinking about the Trinity, but these councils wanted to get together and sort of construct a way of thinking about God that was consistent with the gospels and the way the gospels talked about God.

Now, the other thing that is going on in the early church is not just trying to make it consistent in how we think about God and how God is presented in the gospels, but there was also a pressure for the early church to refute some heretical ideas about God that were creeping into the mix, so there were ideas that just didn't seem appropriate for the emerging church, and there were arguments. Can you imagine a church arguing? Church is pretty good at that. We've been doing it for a long, long time. They were arguing in those first 300 years of the church about God. So, the Trinitarian formula for thinking about God rose up as a response to some of these early arguments about how God was, how God operated, and how we should believe about God. The Trinitarian formula was born, in part, out of the growing pains and challenges to the early church, but it also helped in allowing the Christian faith to further distinguish itself from the Jewish faith.

Judaism had emerged (as we heard in the scriptures this morning) from a polytheistic world. In other words, Judaism was rising, and those Israelites were experiencing God, who they called Yahweh. It was in a polytheistic world. It was a world where there were many gods representing many people and many nations. What we call this today is that, in that early stage, there were tribal gods, so each tribe, each nation, each group of people had their god, and it was from this context that Yahweh emerged for the Israelites.

So, early in the scriptures, you do not have a denial of other gods. In Psalm 82 you have God sitting at the Divine Council. I don't know if you picked up on that imagery, but God is sitting at the Divine Council. Think of this as a cosmic Consistory meeting, and God (Yahweh) is sitting at the table with all of these other gods from other lands and other nations, and God is castigating those other gods, saying "You do not take care of the poor the way you should". Early on in Israelite theology, there was an effort to deal with these many gods, and the early effort was to put Yahweh at the head of the table. So, that's what we have in that Psalm 82, Yahweh taking control of those many other gods and scolding them for their ignoring of the Torah.

The first few verses from 1 Kings 22 that Russ read were even stranger because, while the context is very complicated, what is going on there is that the other gods are scheming to kill King Ahab, so it was almost as if, in that early text, those other Gods could be put to work to do the dirty work—to kill King Ahab. So, this polytheism of many gods was alive and well and Israel was struggling with how to think about that.

Of course, the later faith of Israel would be rigidly monotheistic, one god, and at this point, Israel's one god has rendered all those other tribal gods as nothing more than idols, so there was a transition in Israelite thought from recognizing the other gods to rejecting the other gods. These are just labels. Don't follow them. They are just idols. They are false notions of God. So, when you have the rise of monotheism in Israel, Yahweh alone, all of those other gods are simply idols. It's a fascinating transition in their thoughts about God.

When you think about tribal gods, to give you a good example of how we turn God from universal to tribal in this very era, some of you know (perhaps many of you know) that, on the belt buckles of Nazi soldiers in World War II, was the phrase "Gott mit uns" (which means "God with us"). The Nazis had appropriated the universal god to be their tribal god, that God was with them. That is the temptation of all of us in all lands, in our land and world, is to turn our universal god into a tribal deity. We need to be careful of that. The Nazis were just one example of how that always happens.

So, in the movement from a polytheistic world of tribal gods to a monotheistic world of one god, to the Christian notion of a Triune God, which is one God in three persons, the question that we must struggle with today is: Is this Trinitarian formula for God important? Is it important to our faith today,

or is it just another effort to tribalize God?

A wonderful book called "Faith Seeking Understanding" written by a guy named Daniel Migliore from Princeton Seminary, dedicates a chapter to the tribal notion of God. He lifts up this imagery as incredibly important to our understanding of God and, in particular, to how we live out our faith. Migliore brings up 3 points about the Triune understanding of God. He says this. "To confess that God is Triune is to assert that God is known in relationships". That is to say that God is not just personal. God is not just an exclusive God that we can claim and use, but God in the Triune understanding of God, is known as the mutual giving and receiving of love. God is love, love that is shared in Jesus Christ, who shares it with the faith community, and the faith community shares this love with the world through the Holy Spirit. So, the Triune God is about love on the move because it is a love that is shared among God, among Jesus, among the Holy Spirit and the community of faith.

I love the phrase "confess". Migliore says "To confess God is Triune is to say this is how we experience our God. This is how we confess our faith. This is how we claim our faith". So, when we talk about how we think about God and talk about God as a Triune experience, we are talking about how we confess our faith.

Secondly, Migliore says "To confess that God is Triune is to affirm that God exists in community". Old Testament notions of God in community are talked about as God in covenant with the Israelites. God is in this deep relationship with the Israelites and, as we were learning this morning in our adult class, God is in this relationship with the Israelites, God is violated and forgotten by the Israelites, and God keeps coming back to the relationship. There is nothing we can do to violate or end our relationship with God because we have a covenantal God who never abandons us.

So, in the Old Testament, we have this notion of covenant, and when we think of Jesus, we think about Jesus who is always expressing God's love by bringing people together. Jesus brings people together to eat, to pray, to serve, to heal, to teach, and to worship. In the essence of Christ is always this relationship to community. There is no Christianity without the gathered body of Christ. God exists and is experienced primarily in community. I think, perhaps, one of the great heretical movements (to use a strong word) in our culture we have the temptation to make God an autonomous experience so that I can go out on the beach by myself and have a one-on-one with God and call myself a Christian, and we all have experiences with a Christian God, but the primary way He is experienced is when we gather together, so when Migliore says that a Triune God is about a God that makes Himself known in community and that Jesus is the embodiment of that community, we are coming very close to the essence of this God.

The third point that Migliore makes is "To confess that God is Triune is to affirm that the life of God is essentially self-giving love. The power of compassion and love is stronger than sin and death and our tributarian God suffers with us and suffers for us so that this God can be in community with us".

If you remember back to the old Exodus story, those Israelites, those early Hebrew people are under bondage in Egypt. They are struggling as slaves. They are in pain and they cry out to God. What is so beautiful about that story is that it doesn't really say that they cry out to God. What the text says is that they simply cry out and God responds to their pain. God hears their cries and responds with the call to liberation from their slavery. I think that is so true of our God who hears and knows our pain and responds to our cries.

The suffering of God is experienced in the New Testament, of course, with Jesus being in solidarity with those who are in pain and with Jesus taking his place on the cross, suffering for the human family. So, our tributarian formula for God is, in fact, very important I think, because it affirms that God is known primarily in relationships. It affirms that God exists most powerfully in community (That is why being in worship each Sunday is so critically important.), and it affirms that the essence of God

is self-giving love, so when we have this Triune notion, we cannot very easily make God into whatever we want to make God into because God is informed by Jesus, informed by the Holy Spirit and informed by love.

So, I think what the tributarian formula of faith does most powerfully for us is that it keeps us honest. It keeps us honest about who God is. It really pushes the fact that we understand God through the lens of Jesus, through the movement of the Holy Spirit, and that we cannot make God into anything that we want God to be. We can only truly experience God as love, as lived out in community and as expressed and seen most powerfully in relationships that are formed and nurtured in the name of Christ.

Today we celebrate (and we grapple with again) this idea of God in three persons—a God who is love, a God who is compassion and a God who is revealed in service to our people, so we give thanks to God for our Christian faith. We give thanks to God for the revelation of God's character in Jesus Christ, and we give thanks for the movement of the Holy Spirit which keeps God's spirit alive and well in all of us. Thanks be to God. Amen.