

**“How Majestic Is Your Name”  
A Sermon by the Rev. R. Scott Herr  
First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – June 4, 2023**

**Please Read:  
Psalm 8  
Matthew 28:16-20**

In Shakespeare’s famous adage from *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet laments, “What's in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet.” It’s a reminder how a name is merely a construct to designate something or someone. It’s the reality of the thing or person that really matters.

The Psalmist declares, “Oh LORD, how majestic is your name in all the earth...” and then goes on to describe God’s relationship with all of creation, and the special relationship God has with human beings in all of creation, crowning us with honor and glory. There are dozens of different names for God in the Hebrew and Greek books of the Bible, but here the name is the one given to Moses at the burning bush. It’s called the tetragrammaton, the four letters in English YHWH (for the Hebrew, יהוה). We don’t really know how to actually pronounce it because for centuries, a Jew would read over this as “Adonai.” Jews believe it’s too holy to say, but means, “I Am Who I Am,” implying that no matter what we may try and call God, no name can define or limit the reality of the mystery of God’s being, the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of all that is and was and ever will be!

St Augustine of Hippo, the great philosopher and theologian of the 4<sup>th</sup> century who wanted so much to understand the doctrine of the Trinity in order to explain it logically was walking along the seashore and reflecting on this mystery. Suddenly he saw a little child all alone on the shore. The child made a hole in the sand, ran to the sea with a little cup, filled her cup, came, and poured it into the hole she had made in the sand. Back and forth she went to the sea, filled her cup and came and poured it into the hole. Augustine went up to her and said, "Little child, what are doing?" and she replied, "I am trying to empty the sea into this hole." "How do you think," Augustine asked her, "that you can empty this immense sea into this tiny hole with this tiny cup?" To which she replied, " And you, how do you suppose that with this your small head you can comprehend the immensity of God?" With that the child disappeared. It was later thought that Augustine had been given a theology lesson by an angel!

Cute story, but too often that’s where we leave the Trinity, shrugging our shoulders and scratching our heads, saying, “Well, you just have to believe it...” But why is the teaching of the Trinity so important? Let me put it this way: I believe that what

we believe in helps shape who we are. So, our theology, what we think about God, really does matter!

I invite you to consider three points with me today concerning the Trinity: The first is the *relational nature of God*; secondly *the loving quality of the relationship* between the persons of the Trinity; and finally, how the relationships in the godhead may be a *useful paradigm for the church* and our life together.

The first thing one has to admit about the Trinity is that, well.. the math is tricky! Singing “God in Three Persons, blessed Trinity” immediately alerts us that we are entering into mystery. But the three persons point to the fact that in the very nature of God is not singularity, but relationship. In the very being of God is diversity and complexity. Theologians from the classical church fathers to more recent thinkers like Karl Barth and Jürgen Moltmann in the Protestant tradition and Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar in the Roman Catholic tradition go into great detail about the technical intricacies of the persons of Father, Son and Holy Spirit and their relationships. Suffice it to say that part of the mystery of the Trinity that is clear to us is that God has familial relationships. At the heart of who God is as revealed in Father, Son and Holy Spirit is *relationships like a family*.

I should say, like a healthy family. I was at the Rotary grants award ceremony this week and was moved to hear leaders of different community organizations talk about their work and the people they serve. One organization leader got up and talked about the three high school seniors he took up to Boston to look at schools together. It was the first time for any of those girls that anyone in their families graduated from high school. He took them out to dinner after the day of looking at colleges. And one of the girls started crying. He asked, “Why are you crying?” And she paused and then confessed, “This is the first time that I can remember I’ve sat at the dinner table and had a conversation with full eye contact.”

Indeed, the family members of the Trinity are different, but equal. There is full eye contact around the table! This Triune nature of God is biblical, in the sense that the earliest Christians could not help but talk about their experience of God except in Trinitarian formulas. We just read how the first disciples were commanded to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing in the name of the Trinity and received the blessing of Trinitarian grace, love and fellowship. Part of the mystery of this divine communion is that we also are welcome into God’s family. In baptism we are given the identity of beloved sons and daughters of God.

So perhaps just as important as the technicalities of the *who* of the persons of the Trinity is the *how* of their relationship. If God is love, then the idea of One God in Three Persons opens up the possibilities for understanding the relational nature of God. One of my favorite books on the Trinity is by Dale Bruner. It's entitled *The Holy Spirit: Shy member of the Trinity*. Bruner talks about how The Holy Spirit is *shy* and does not draw attention to herself, but rather points to Jesus and the Father. There is a *deferential* quality to how the three persons of the One God relate to one another. The Holy Spirit doesn't move around saying, "Hey, look at me! Learn about me! Receive my love! Follow me!" but rather reminds us, "Hey, look at Jesus! Learn about Jesus! Receive the love of Jesus! Follow Jesus!" The Spirit, if you will, glorifies the Son and the Son glorifies the Father. And the Father says, "Behold my Beloved Son with whom I am well pleased!" You can see this deferential quality that is at the heart of who God is. A more traditional way of understanding this is the word *grace*. Even within God-self there is this eternal gifting... a complete freedom to give.

But in addition to generous deference, there is a *sending* quality at the heart of the Trinity. John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son..." God sent Jesus to offer himself for the world. Jesus then promised to send the Holy Spirit to enliven the Church and the Church then is sent by the Holy Spirit to be the Body of Christ here and now for the world. The love which is at the heart of the Godhead is not simply for Godself, but for us. There is this self-giving love that fuels the sending of the Son and the Spirit into the world, and in turn the Spirit sends the church into the world.

Which brings us to the final question of the importance of the Trinity for the church today: If the Triune God is inherently a relational being, with deferential love for others as the core quality of relationship, does this give the church a paradigm, a guide for our quality of life together? And if so, what does that mean for us today? How do we function as a community who worships the Triune God?

We have been learning over and over again about the mental health crisis in our society, particularly among younger generations. Part of that is social media, but a lot of that is loneliness from an overt lack of genuine community. I read an article in the NYT this week about the importance of community.<sup>1</sup> Part of what the article noted how community is built one week at a time, like coming to church every week and seeing the same people and building relationships that are caring and

---

<sup>1</sup> Brad Stulberg, "For People to Really Know Us, We Must Show Up," (*New York Times*, May 20, 2023).

accepting. That's why we celebrate Pride Month as a church. That sign out there says "All are welcome!" And we mean it. All: straight, Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, young and old, rich and poor.... All are welcome and valued, because in the church we believe all are given gifts for a stronger community...

One of my favorite images of the Trinity comes from Gregory of Nazianzus and was later developed by John of Damascus in the 7<sup>th</sup> century: *perichoresis*. The circle dance. Peri – around; and choresis, or dance (choreography). I think this image is helpful. Whether you like the idea of a ballet troupe or formula one pit crew, the point is clear: everyone has something to give, and we need to be coordinated to accomplish our work together well. And while we may not have enough alone, together joined with the Triune God, we can do great things!

One last point... I know it sometimes feels like we don't have enough. Did you notice how many disciples were there when Jesus gave them the great commission? Eleven. It's a whole sermon in itself, but that number is one short of the important number of 12 in Jewish numerology. Twelve Tribes of Judah. The twelve Disciples. The Twelve Apostles, etc. But no, here it's *eleven*. I think that number is important to remind us that the church, the Body of Christ will always be one short of what we think we need... until we remember that we are welcomed to join in the life of the Trinity who binds us in communion together...

The church is the fellowship where we who are one short, broken and hurting, receive God's healing love. We hear the good news that despite how much we may be lacking, God loves us and will provide for us. And as we learn that we are accepted and valued by God's grace, we also learn what it means to show unconditional love and acceptance to others. That's what it means to go and make disciples of all nations: We share with others this good news that all are loved unconditionally. God welcomes us and calls us to self-giving service so that the kingdom of God may grow to include more and more people, indeed, everyone!

Oh LORD, how Majestic is your name! Whatever name we call God, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit is what God is all about. Family-like *relationships*; deferential and self-giving love, and a people sent out to bring good news for the world. As we come to the table today, reflect on the mystery of who God is, that our lives and life together may be formed and transformed by this mysteriously Living and infinitely Loving God...

*In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.*