

“Circle of Life (Trinity Sunday)”

Scripture: Romans 8:12-17

Graphics: circle, names

Big Truth: So often, we try to name things in order to figure out what they are and understand how they work. With God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - it's difficult to understand with simple labels. Instead, it's better to describe God in terms of a relationship. Instead of a triangle, a circle is a better representation of that relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Because God is relationship, we are called into relationship with God and others...to live the life of freedom in Him. God is life.

Focus Phrase: My life is found in the Triune God of love.

1. Introduction

- A. Consider the following situations and apply the proper term to each:
- i. 1. A mosquito lands on your arm and, feeling it there, you slap it with your hand. Have you committed *murder* or *manslaughter* (or, in this case, bug-slaughter)?
 - ii. 2. You're traveling in your car on a back road in the American Southeast, listening to a radio with crackling static in the background on which a song plays that prominently features stringed instruments played with a bow. Are you listening to AM or FM radio, a fiddle or a violin, and is the music bluegrass or country?
 - iii. 3. You're living in 19th-century England and helping to lace up your wife's corset which, you, being an inattentive cad, pull too tight. She hits the floor unconscious. Has she fainted or has she passed out?
- B. Subtle differences, you might say? As my family likes to say, “Six, or one-half-dozen the other, right?” Well, not so fast. Let's see how well you did on the quiz.
- i. 1. If you premeditated your attack on the mosquito, grabbing a fly swatter as a weapon, sneaking up on it and the like, you committed *murder*. Reactively slapping the little bugger out of momentary panic is *manslaughter*.
 - ii. 2. If you hear static on the radio, it's probably *AM* radio. It's the same instrument at a symphony or a hoedown, but if the devil goes down to Georgia with one, it's called a *fiddle*. And if you hear more mandolin, fiddle and banjo than guitar, bass and drums, it's called *bluegrass*.
 - iii. 3. Finally, Prudence has likely fainted right there in the parlor (Victorians called it “the vapors”), indicating a short period of unconsciousness. Passing out is more like deep sleeping.

- C. Knowing these subtle-yet-important differences is pretty trivial, but we toss around terms all the time, imprecisely and inaccurately, maybe not grasping their full meaning.
- D. And we do that probably more than any place else here in church. We tend to use a lot of church-ese words like sanctification, liturgy, and discipleship.
- E. Even today, which is Trinity Sunday, as we focus on attention - and WORSHIP - on the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we should spend some time knowing WHO we worship. Whether it's in the parking lot or in the sanctuary or a in Sunday School room, words like Trinity can evoke some serious head-scratching...and have for thousands of years.
- F. If I were to ask each of us, "What's the difference between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit?" I might get a pretty wide range of answers.
- G. Some of us might try to draw a diagram, or use a metaphor like water, ice, and steam, yet all still H₂O. Or an egg, which is made up of yoke, white, and shell, but still 1 egg.
- H. One of my favorite ways to describe the Trinity is not 1+1+1, since that equals 3. **But 1x1x1=1.**
- I. All these metaphors and explanations fall short, though. Despite our best efforts at explaining the Trinity, a full understanding seems to elude even lifelong churchgoers.
- J. But here's a thought: In our desire to define all the terms correctly, maybe we've missed the whole idea altogether. Trying to use definitive terms to describe God is a bit like nailing Jell-o to a tree - eventually, it all falls apart.
- K. Human language has distinctive limits in trying to define the divine. That's because the divine has NO LIMITS. So rather than arguing about the natures of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, maybe we should be focusing on the real essence of the Trinity — **the power of relationships.**
- L. This morning, we're going to Romans 8, verses 12-17. The Apostle Paul, writing to the Roman Church in the first century, didn't try to line out a systematic theology of how God works. He used trinitarian terms interchangeably — the Spirit, Father, Christ — but didn't try to define each one. Instead, Paul saw God at work, in a uniquely relational way, both within God's own nature and with humans, and invited the church into that relationship.
- M. Our message today is called **The Circle of Life**...not Simba and Mufasa from the Lion King, but our relationship with God...and because of the relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we also are called into relationship with each other..
- N. Let's pray and then open our Bibles to Romans chapter 8...

O. PRAY!

2. Scripture

A. READ Romans 8:12-17

- B. The very first words in this section, in the translation I read, are “So then...” In the NIV, it reads, “Therefore...” And, when we see a ‘therefore’ in scripture, we MUST ask ourselves what it’s ‘there for.’ And it always points to what came before it.
- C. In this case, Paul spent the first 11 verses of this chapter on one main topic: **the indwelling of the Holy Spirit**. If you reach way back in your memory, all the way back to last week, you’ll remember that on the first Pentecost day, the church and each believer present was FILLED with the Holy Spirit!
- D. Faith and an indwelling of the Holy Spirit go hand-in-hand! And, if you stop and think about it, the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus Christ, given to us by the Father. And in that one sentence, we see the full expression of the Trinity at work. It’s all about relationship - Father sends the Son, and then sends the Holy Spirit of the Son. Spirit is God. Jesus is God. Father is God.
- E. “So then...,” Paul wrote, as brothers and sisters who have the INDWELLING of the Holy Spirit, **we are debtors**.
- i. Being a debtors means you owe something to someone.
 - ii. In this case, there are two options: either you’re a debtor to your flesh, which can be simply defined as the selfish nature we exhibit - me first, me only, me always. OR (and Paul doesn’t actually state this, but implies it), you are a debtor to the Triune God. Two choices. That’s it.
 - iii. If someone stays in debt long enough, that person becomes a *slave* to whatever that person is indebted to. Money. Lust. Freetime. Me Time. Fame. Pride. Whatever focuses on ME and MY wants and needs. And, Paul said, that type of slavery leads to one thing: death.
 - iv. And, as we all know, death separates us from others...it breaks the relationship. In the case of spiritual death, we are separated from God.
 - v. YET, there’s hope! YET IF, Paul said, you live according to the Spirit of Jesus, sent to you by the Father, then you will put to death everything about the flesh (EVEN DEATH) AND you will LIVE! Spiritually AND physically AND emotionally! And LIVING allows the relationships you have with God and with others to continue and grow.
 - vi. You become a debtor to God, which is exactly where God wants you to be.
- F. The Holy Spirit in us gives us SO many good gifts - like Carol talked about with the littlest ones.
- i. We receive a new **status** - Children of God. Relationship.

- ii. We receive a spirit of **adoption**. Now, there are two different ‘spirits’ in this section. One is the Holy Spirit (indicated by the capital S in your bible). The other is a spirit within each of us - an attitude or thoughts or desires (indicated by a small s). The Holy Spirit (capital S) connects with your spirit (small s) and convinces and assures you that you are God’s child! We can know that we know that we know we are His! Relationship.
- iii. We receive a **Daddy**. Paul uses the term “Abba, Father” One Hebrew term for Father, or Dad, is ‘Ab’. But when said by a small child, that becomes Abba, since it’s easier to say for young children. So, when we have the Holy Spirit of Jesus in us, given by the Father, our spirit gets low and we can’t help but say, “Daddy” “Abba, Father”. Relationship.
- iv. Filled with the Holy Spirit of Jesus, we also receive a new **title**: Heir. Stacy and I love to watch stories about historic English royalty...and how someone becomes the heir apparent...ready to inherit EVERYTHING in the kingdom. Now, Jesus, as the son of the Father, is heir to all things...and in fact, already owns all things. But, listen to THIS: we are brothers and sisters with Jesus because we have the Holy Spirit IN US and are called children of God...alongside JESUS! The KING! We are scheduled to inherit EVERYTHING in the universe...ALL the things that Jesus inherited.
- v. Wait! But didn’t Jesus suffer and die on the cross before he ascended to heaven and is seated on the right hand of the Father? Ah...well, that’s all true. And so, when we are filled with the Holy Spirit, we inherit it all... the universe, the mission, the love and grace and mercy, and the **suffering** and the hard work of being a child of God...a follower of Jesus...an heir.
- vi. But, the final thing we receive, in this relationship with the Triune God, is **Jesus’ glory**. Jesus’ glory means being exalted to the highest place by God It’s one of those church-ese terms, but if we are fully in relationship with God, then God will give us the same full honors He has given to Jesus...we are co-heirs with Jesus!

3. Application

- A. Do you see how this is all about relationship, even though we can’t define God in a simple chart or graphic? The Triune God is like this: Because the Holy Spirit is IN you, you are a child of God. You are adopted by the Triune God of the Universe! You are a co-heir with God’s only son, Jesus Christ. You have a loving Father, who you get to call ‘Daddy.’ You will inherit ALL things, including the cross of Jesus. And, you will be glorified with Jesus when he returns.
- B. If we try to depict the Triune God, how can we draw a relationship for that? It’s like trying to explain beauty or air.

- C. Lots of times, we see the Triune God depicted as a triangle, with each corner being a nature of God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, all connected but none the same as the other...yet one whole triangle.
- D. The thing is that triangles are not that common in the natural order of God's creation. Think about it — where do you see such hard edges naturally occurring? Rocky mountains jutting upward, maybe some leaf shapes ... anywhere else?
- E. Triangles are, more often than not, human constructs and that our triangular, pyramid-based diagrams and explanations about God's nature are just that — human attempts at divine definition.
- F. I'm thinking of a whole different shape to help us understand with relationship that God has among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - an alternative description, a subtle shift of perception.
- G. John of Damascus, one of the early church fathers who lived during the late seventh and early eighth centuries, rejected the normal definitions and calculated reasoning about the Trinity and came up with a wholly different term for the oneness and threeness of God — perichoresis, which loosely translated from Greek means **“circle dance.”**
 - i. In other words, the Trinity is not primarily defined by the distinctiveness or unity or “substance” of the three persons involved, but rather as a circle — a dynamic community defined by love.
 - ii. To see one is to see all three — to dance with one is to dance with all three. You're invited into the circle and into a love relationship where you see God face-to-face, as a child hold hands and dances with loving parents.
 - iii. Circles are way more natural! They appear everywhere from the sun and moon to the earth itself. Makes sense then, that we should be thinking of a circle as the dominant paradigm that shapes our understanding of God's creative and relational nature.
 - iv. You can't define a circle by its points. You can only define it as a whole. And it's pretty easy to differentiate a circle from a triangle.
- H. The truth is that we'll probably never understand the Trinity by trying to define it, even with a circle.
- I. Even Paul, one of the most prolific writers and theologians of his day, runs round the idea. The only way we'll really “get” the Trinity is to join the circle and live into that relationship.
- J. Given all that...so what? Where's the application, Pastor Steve? I'm glad you asked.
- K. If our Triune God is like a circle, then God is the Circle of Life. And you and I, in relation to the Triune God, have a choice to make. You can choose to live

in one of two ways: You can live according to the flesh, or you can choose to live according to the Spirit.

- i. Living according to the flesh lead to physical and spiritual death. But that's not all it leads to. Along the way to death, it leads to fear, says Paul. It leads you into anger, frustration, greed, pride, and selfishness - me first, me only, me always. And it ENDS in death! God does not want that for you.
- ii. God's alternative is to choose to live according to the Spirit. According to God's will and way as given to us in the Bible. Choose assurance, adoption, and freedom from having to be your own boss. Choose to have intimacy with God. Choose to put others first to serve them in God's strength - always. Be child-like as you sit with God and say, "Abba". In one word: LIVE. Now, and forever.
- iii. You are being invited right now into the Circle of Life that is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You are a co-heir to it all.
- iv. Choose life...Choose to be in relationship with the Triune God every day.
- v. And the amazing thing is that we get to do that with all the other people in our lives that are choosing that God-given life as well! And not only that, but we get to keep on, keep on, keep on inviting others to dance with God with us!

4. Conclusion

- A. It's not possible to precisely (or is it accurately?) define the Father, Son, nor Holy Spirit. We also can't define life and death apart from God's definition of life and death. We can't define success or failure apart from God's love for us and the salvation He offers in Jesus Christ.
- B. The world thinks that fame, money, toys, and worldly status are all that matters. God thinks that NONE of those things matter because those pursuits only lead to you taking yourself out of relationship with others and with God. And the relationship is not only the thing that matters, but the thing that defines God for us.
- C. Are you pursuing the "circle dance" with the Father...the Son...and the Holy Spirit? With others?
- D. Are you ready to let God be God without defining all things about God?
- E. Are you fully aware of your adoption to the God of the Universe?
- F. Imagine a church that loves to dance with the Triune God every time we gather together! That's LIFE! Let's Live!
- G. Let's Pray!