

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: Three in One

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Scripture:

Genesis 1:1-3

¹ In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ² Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. ³ And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

John 17:1-4, 24-26

¹ After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed:

"Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. ² For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. ³ Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. ⁴ I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do.

²⁴ "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.²⁵

"Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. ²⁶ I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them."

Transcript:

Today, I'm going to talk about something a little different, so you kind of get two different words from God today. We're doing a sermon series called, Is it good or is it God, kind of on the basic beliefs of Christianity, because a lot of people, there's a lot of conventional wisdom out there. It sounds good, but it's not actually what we believe as Christians. And even people who know what we actually believe as Christians don't know how it changes how we live, how it changes how we handle money or school or relationships or decisions or things like that.

And today, we're going to talk about a light and easy topic, the Trinity. That God is one God existing in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All three equally God and still one God. It is very confusing. It is hard to understand. It is even harder to preach about, which is why I never have done it. Never preached on this before. My wife and I have a friend who had a bird feeder on top of a pole, and there was this squirrel that kept climbing up and eating the seed.

She got tired of that, so she put grease on the pole and spent the rest of the day watching as the squirrel scrambled up the pole and slid back down, scrambled up, slid back down. It was very satisfying for her, not the squirrel. That's what trying to understand the Trinity is like, scramble, scramble, scramble, slide back down, scramble, scramble, scramble, slide back down. But if we don't understand the Trinity, our experience of God will be more anemic, weaker, less fulfilling, less powerful.

A triune God is different than some of the conventional wisdom in our culture where God is sort of seen as this old man with a white beard, or the force, or nature, or whatever. But when we understand that God is three persons in one, Father, Son, Holy Spirit, it leads to better relationships. It leads to a deeper experience of God, and it can even make our schools, our offices, our homes, our cities better. And I'll give examples. There's a lot of analogies that try to help us understand the Trinity. None of them actually really work.

A lot of you have probably heard the water one like, God's like water. It can exist as a solid, liquid, or gas, but it's still water. Or maybe it's like me, I'm a father, a husband, and a pastor, but I'm still me in all those different roles. Or it's maybe like an egg where you have the shell, the white, and the yolk, but it's still one egg, God is like a taco, meat, cheese, salsa, but still one taco. I mean, this all don't really work. They all are examples of the theological heresy called modalism, that says that sometimes God is the Father, and sometimes God is the Son. No.

They are always all three present in each of those persons. Jesus is not a God starter kit. Holy Spirit is not like mini God. But they do relate to us differently. The Father is the authority figure, that good, good parent we all long for. The Son became one of us in Jesus and died to pay the price for our sins. And the Holy Spirit is our sustainer and our guide and our inspiration. Our experience of God is bigger when we can kind of experience all three, but they are still one God. It is a paradox, two contradictory things that are still true.

Sort of like in physics how light can be both a particle and a wave. It is bigger than our brains. We can't comprehend it, which makes sense. If he's God, if he's a real God, he's going to be bigger than what our brains can grasp. Only a God that we made up, that God our brains can grasp. But a real God, that God, the God that we understand, that's a wimpy God, that's a small God, because we can understand. A big God where there's some mystery, that's a God of power and that's good news. And to me, this is proof that the Trinity is real.

No other religion has this because who would make this up? If you're making up a religion, you would not make this up, right? God is one, but he's three. He's not more three than he is one. He's not more one than he is three. This is great. Everybody's going to want to believe this. You would not make this up. And there's no one passage in the Bible that says the word Trinity, but it is everywhere alluded to. The last thing Jesus says to his disciples is, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit."

The Book of Ephesians says, "Through the Son, we have access to the Father by one spirit." First sentence of the Bible says, "In the beginning, God the Father created the heavens and the earth." Now, the earth was formless and empty and the Spirit of God, Holy Spirit, was hovering over the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. You have the Father and the Spirit present creation, but you also have the Son, because God creates through his word. He says, "Let there be light."

And then the New Testament says in the beginning, clearly alluding to Genesis, was the word, and the word was with God. And the word was God, through him, all things were made and the word became flesh and dwelt among us. The word God uses to speak creation into being is the second person of the Trinity, the Son, who becomes one of us in Jesus. All three are present at creation, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which is why a few verses later, God says, "Let us make humankind in our image." Plural. And yet scripture still says the Lord our God is one.

That's the theology. That's the what? So what? So what? So what difference does it make? What difference does this make in how we live? And that's really the important question because we need to try to understand the Trinity. If we start to overthink it, if we go too far, we just get lost in our own heads because we're trying to unscrew the inscrutable. Back when the Roman empire was collapsing, there was a hot theological debate about how Jesus could be both human and God.

And some people said, and I'm just going to quote, I'm quoting, some people said, "Jesus was two persons in one composite nature." Others said, "No, it's a union in hypostasis." You can totally see how they were messed up, right? But fortunately, they had a big old meeting and they cleared everything up and this is what they said. They said that Jesus is one person and one hypostasis but exists in two natures, which are at once undivided and unconfused. Are you undivided and unconfused right now? No, you were very divided.

You were very confused because that made no sense. And that's what happens if we try to overthink the Trinity. You kind of got to stand back and look at it as a whole, rather than try to figure out how the parts fit together. You step back and kind of see how it affects our lives. It's like a sentence that my wife read to me this week from a book she's reading where the author describes a woman sitting by a pool and he says, "She was a long limbed Langrist type. From 30 feet away, she looked like a lot of class.

From 10 feet away, she looked like someone made up to be seen from 30 feet away." From 30 feet away, the Trinity makes more sense, because we can see the difference that it makes in our lives. First, the Trinity means that relationship is everything, more important than anything else, more important than grades or success or school or money or anything else. Because what the Trinity means is that what God is, is a relationship between three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and yet still one God. God is a relationship. God is a community.

God is a small group. That's what the Bible means when it says that God is love. Doesn't say God loves, though he does. Doesn't say God is loving, though he is. It says what God is in his nature is love. It's not just what he does. It's who he is, which means love, relationship is the ultimate cosmic reality. It's the ultimate... The philosophical term would be the ontological ground of all being, for fancy words, which is why the universe is wired relationally. It's built relationally.

Protons, neutrons, electrons form in relationship with each other to make atoms, which then form in relationship with other atoms to make molecules, which then form in relationship with other molecules to make mountains and trees and chocolate chip cookies and suns orbit or planets orbit their sun in relationship to the sun. The entire universe is set up relationally because God is a relationship, which means that friendship and family and community is more important than anything else.

This is confirmed by every happiness study ever done that says that what brings lasting joy and fulfillment is relationship, because we are made in the image of God and what God is, is a relationship. I know we know this, but we don't live it. We do not live as though relationship is everything, particularly in American culture. That brings me to the second way that the Trinity changes our lives, and that is that community is primary. We are very a individualistic culture. And some of that is good. But like all good things, if you take it too far, it becomes a bad thing.

We are a hyper individualistic culture, and other cultures aren't this way, African culture is much more community focused than American culture. And American culture says that our ultimate fulfillment happens when we maximize ourselves, when I can be all that I can be, achieve success and money and popularity, that's where I'm going to be happy. But what the Trinity tells us is the heart of reality is a relationship, is a community. God is a community, a Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Our wholeness comes when we find our place in community, not when we get everything we want. This is not how our culture operates. I see this in marriage where often in our culture, people view their spouse as a means to their happiness. It's a transactional relationship, or we even see it in our kids. We see our kids sometimes as just extensions of ourselves, as means to fulfilling our life plan. Even our faith in America is very individualistic. Jesus saves me from my sins, me and my Jesus.

And that's true, but Jesus also saves entire communities of people. But we don't lose our individuality either. I mean, the Trinity is the ultimate example of diversity in unity, three distinct persons, yet one God. Community is primary. And if we really understood this, then our number one question would not be what's good for me. It would be what's good for us, what's good for this community, because I cannot be whole unless my community is whole. And think about the communities you're part of, your job or school or church or living facility.

If the number one question everyone in that community was asking was what is good for this community, what is good for us, think how much better those places would be than when everyone is asking, what's good for me? A Christian speaker, Tony Campolo tells a story of speaking at a missions conference. And during the question and answer, someone asked him to pray for a missionary who needed a couple thousand dollars to continue doing his work. And Tony Campolo said, "I refuse to pray for that."

And instead, he passed a basket around and said, "Just put whatever loose change you have in your wallet into the basket." And they raised enough money for that missionary to continue his work. He was community focused, not individually focused. Individual focus says, "I have to solve this problem. It's up to me." A community focus says, "We have it in our power together with God's help to solve this problem." Within this church, if we thought communally, we could solve so many problems on the East Side through the power of God, working through us.

I know a group of Christian CEOs who started meeting together to pray and read scripture and ask this question, what is God's redemptive purpose for my business? And they started to do things that were much more focused on community. They said if the cities we're a part of aren't thriving, if there's crime and there's drugs and there's poverty, then we're not going to thrive. Our employees won't thrive. They started locating new branches of their business in under-resourced communities in order to provide jobs and hope.

Some of them realized the way that they did performance reviews didn't create community. It shattered it and created unhealthy rivalries rather than cooperation, so they changed that. CEOs had a Trinitarian mindset. They were focused on community, not maximizing me, maximizing we so that we all prosper. And that brings me to my third point. It's a sermon on the Trinity, so there has to be three points, right? There cannot be four points. My first draft had four points. I had to cut one of the points out because it can only have three points.

This is about the Trinity. God is joy. God is also just. God is also righteous. God is also holy. But because God is love, he must also be joy, because the most joy we feel is always in relationship. I mean, it's like when you're falling in love with someone, and they're in love with you. I mean, you just kind of feel giddy when that happens. Relationship is what brings the most joy. How much joy must God have who since all of time has existed as a relationship of love between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each one fully God, each one infinite?

It's like infinity times three. That's a lot of community. That's a lot of friendship. How much joy must God have? And everything reflects that joy. All of creation reflects his joy, right? You look

at creation. God didn't just phone creation in. Genesis doesn't say, "And behold, God made a cat and said that's going to have to do. I'm going to call it a day." Now he made giraffes and platypuses. Why would you make a platypus? Because it's funny. Because it's joyful. He invites us into his joy. The night before Jesus is crucified, he's with his disciples and he prays.

This is a very profound prayer. He says, "Father, I want those that you have given me," that means his disciples, you, me, "to be with me where I am and to see the glory you have given me because you love me before the creation of the world. I have made you known to them in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them." What's going on here is that the three persons of the Trinity are having a conversation and we get to overhear it. And Jesus says, "I got an idea. I got an idea.

This infinite joy and fulfillment we got going on here, in the Trinity here, I got an idea. Let's invite Dudley into this. He needs something, man. He's all messed up, right? He needs something, man. Let's invite Dudley into this infinite amount of joy and love and community we've got going here." God says that about you too. Wouldn't it be cool if we invited... Put your name there into this infinite amount of love, joy, and community. What that means is you are wanted. God is filled with joy, which means he is always happy to see you.

You can always come to him no matter what. Sometimes when my wife and I, if we need to ask one of our kids to do something or tell them something, they don't want to hear like, "You've got a dentist appointment," we'll wait for the right timing, if they're in a good mood, right? Because otherwise, tension occurs. The other way too, it works in reverse. Kids are like, "I need to borrow the car, but maybe not today. They seem like they're in a bad mood." God is not like that. He is filled with joy, which means he's always glad to see you.

Relationships are everything, community is primary, and God is full of joy. This week, practice the Trinity by putting relationships first, investing in the communities you're a part of, and going to God daily knowing he's full of joy and he's always glad to see you. And then just real practically, just real practically, I find it helpful to pray to the different persons of the Trinity. All one God, but they each are also distinct. For instance, when I feel the need for a brother who understands what I'm going through, the pain I'm going through, I turn to the Son.

I pray to the Son who became one of us in Jesus and knows what this life feels like. When I feel the need for wisdom or guidance or discernment or when I'm in worship, I pray to the Holy Spirit because the Holy Spirit is the one that connects me to the heart of God. And when I need a good father, I think especially since my own father has died, when I need a good, good father, I pray to our perfect father in heaven.

This week, practice praying to the different persons of the Trinity to have a bigger, deeper experience of God, and then live out the implications of the Trinity in your life. One of the things I remember from when my kids were growing up years was when my son was around six, he wanted to play soccer. We signed him up for soccer. But when it came time for the first

practice, he was nervous to go. I walked with him to the field, met the coach. He immediately sat down on the ground, my son, immediately sat down on the ground and wouldn't budge.

And when the coach tried to talk to him, my son was really rude to him and no amount of coaxing helped, right? It was awkward. I felt embarrassed, like somehow this reflected poorly on my parenting skills. I looked around at all the other moms and dads dropping off their six year olds for soccer, happy families, perfect families with moms and dads who raised kids who joyfully go to soccer practice. And all of my fears of failure and all my need not only to be a good dad, but appear to be a good dad. Because after all, some of these perfect families may go to the church.

How does it look for the pastor's kid who won't go to soccer practice? But no amount of coaxing worked. So finally, I said, "Okay, let's go home. We'll try again another a time." As we were driving out the parking lot, my son said, "I want to play soccer." Okay, so turn around, parked, but he wouldn't get out of the car, would not budge. "I want to go home." Wouldn't get out of the car. So I resorted to the true essence of parenting, threats and bribes. "If you go to soccer practice, I'll give you a cookie. If you don't, no video," right? Didn't work.

We drove off again. About two blocks later, "I want to play soccer." Ah! We did this cycle four times. By the fourth time, I was insane. I was completely stark raving crazy. All I wanted was for him to play soccer. What happens if he doesn't play soccer? He'll learn that he can bail on his commitments. He won't learn important life lessons, and he'll become a hippie. Somehow I got to hippie. I skipped a few steps, but I got to hippie. So then I prayed, "Holy Spirit, what should I do? I need your help." And I got an idea. I went over to the coach and I asked the coach for advice.

And he said, "Why don't you and your son just kick the ball back and forth here on the sideline and maybe that will make him comfortable to join the practice?" I went back to the car and I did what I should have done in the first place. I got in the backseat with him and I said, "I get nervous at new things too sometimes. I get that. What do you think would be a good way to get over being nervous?" And he said to go home. And I said, "Well, that solves it for today, but what about the next time?"

How about this, how about you and I just go kick that soccer ball kind of over there near the field. You and I will just kick it. Just you and me. Just you and me. Just you and me. And then if you want to, you can join the practice. And if not, we'll go home." He liked that. That's what we did. Within five minutes, he joined the practice and had a great time. So on the way home, driving him back, I said, "What did you learn today?" And he said, "How to kick a soccer ball." "Other than that," and he said, "If I try new things, sometimes I'm going to like them."

Now that was a Trinitarian solution and that's exactly what I thought at the time, because I'm such a deep thinker. Wow, this is rather true. Of course not, but it was. I had put my sense of success as a dad ahead of relationship with my son. I thought I had to solve this problem on

my own. Didn't turn to community until the end when I asked the coach for advice. Do you think my son thought his father was filled with joy and that he could come to him with any emotion he was having and be honest with his father? Yeah, not so much.

But when I got in the backseat and put the relationship first, leaned into community and asked the coach for help, there was joy. We were made for relationship, community, and joy because we are made in God's image and God is relationship, community, and joy. He invites us into that. God the Father is reaching out to you and to me and to this whole world through the Son with one arm and through the Holy Spirit with another to draw us into the heart of the Father and into the relationship that he is.

And then he sends us out to go bring other people back, to bring them in to the love and the joy and the relationship that is our God. Holy Spirit, connect us to the heart of the Father through Jesus the Son. Triune God of grace, draws into the relationship that you are so that we can bring others in as well and show the world how good you are. We pray this in your name Jesus, amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Suggested Icebreaker Question:

- What was one of your favorite meals as child? Is it still a favorite today?

Opening Question:

- Looking back, were you able to apply any of the things we talked about last time to your life this week? What did you do? How did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions -- Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions - Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- Which person of the Triune God do you most relate to, and which seems most distant: Father? Son? Holy Spirit? Explain.
- The doctrine of the Trinity means that 1) Relationships are more important than anything else 2) Community matters, 3) God is in a good mood (full of joy) and

wants us to be as well. Which of these three do you struggle with, which is most natural to you?

Closing Question and Application:

- Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing Group Prayer:

- Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.