

“The Galilean Two-Step” based on Matthew 28:16-20

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on Trinity Sunday, June 4, 2023, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

In my first semester of Seminary, I was excited to learn there was a flag football league. I wanted to go out and meet some new people through shared experiences. Now, for my size, I'm reasonably fast, or at least I used to be. Now, in tackle football that's a good thing, because if I have the ball, I can run through people, or if I can get close enough, I can just hit 'em and knock 'em over.

Now, in flag football, I wasn't allowed to hit anyone. I wasn't allowed to run over anyone either. Instead, I had to be fast enough to avoid people, or grab their flag. Add in that every other player was 10-15 years younger than me, and you can see that this was a recipe for disaster.

In my first game, on a wet field, I was running as fast as I could when I had to stop because the player that I was chasing changed direction. I slipped on the wet grass and injured my thigh. I went to the urgent care, sure I had torn something and hoping I had not. The physician barely looked at my leg. There was no x-ray, or even really attention paid to it at all. What I got instead was a 25-minute lecture about my weight, and the advice that if I didn't heal in two weeks, to go establish care with a primary physician.

Now, I understand, the number one risk to my health is my weight – I get it. It wasn't the first time I'd heard this, nor had I never tried to do anything about it. But in that moment, I was never going to be receptive to a talk about my weight. I had pain in my leg caused by my participation in an athletic competition, and yes, if I had weighed less, it might not have happened, but likewise, wearing cleats might have prevented the injury too. What I needed was assurance about my leg being fine, or treatment.

My leg did get better, and so, a few weeks later, I got back on that field. This time, the opposing team handed the ball off for a running play and I was there, they tried to do a spin move, I reached out and grabbed...their pants and pulled them right off. In the process, I got my ring finger caught in the waistband and went back to urgent care. Guess what – I got the same physician who now ignored my finger and gave me the same lecture about my weight as though in the last three weeks, I was supposed to have lost 110 pounds by the time I came back. I understand the greatest threat at all times to my life and health. but to this day, my finger constantly hurts. It's a little crooked and the nail grows funny.

So, what does this have to do with Trinity Sunday? Well, across church history, no teaching is more basic to what it means to be a Christian than the doctrine of the Trinity, which we celebrate today. However, across church history, no teaching has been harder to understand than the doctrine of the Trinity, which we celebrate today. In truth, this teaching is not only the core foundation of our faith, but it is itself a mystery – a mystery which requires faith. In the early church, it was this incredible mystery that became the agreed upon standard, for whose beliefs qualified as orthodox, and whose were considered heresy.

After all, if we are to follow the command to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our mind, with all our soul, and with all our strength, and then also love our neighbor as we love ourselves, then it would follow, that we should probably know who the Lord our God is and who our neighbor is, that we are supposed to love. Now, today's sermon is not about the neighbor side, so I'll let you know that is simply anyone God puts in our life.

In light of this, what happens then is that we take a famous passage like our reading from Matthew today, is we turn it into a great commission to go out and convert people to the faith. Now, don't get me wrong, I believe strongly in evangelism. I believe reaching people and letting them know about God's love for them by sharing my faith with them. And likewise, if you have heard my sermons before, then you know, that I care a great deal about Trinitarian theology and the gospel of who Jesus is and what he has done for us. That is part of every sermon I deliver.

However, what Jesus asks for here is not the conversion of people from every nation, but the discipling of people from every nation, leading to baptism and continuing with teaching. The goal here is not to get people to say they believe in Jesus or the Trinity, and then send them on their way out on their own to do the same with others. The goal here is not to quickly get a person to repent of their sin, to turn from their wicked ways and have a change of heart, as though I would have immediately lost weight from that doctor's speech.

No, the goal is to walk with them – start to finish – as they encounter this Jesus and the Triune God, so that by teaching what Jesus commanded, they might observe these commands, and disciple others the same. That starts with meeting the most pressing need in the moment.

Just as the most important thing for me to be healthy is for me to lose weight, so too, the most important thing for our faith is to know who God is through Jesus. But just like I needed care for my injury and not a lecture, so too, we must meet pressing needs when we see the problems of this world, the people in need, those suffering the pain of unexpected loss and deep grief. We must address this first because this begins the discipleship process by coming alongside and sharing in the life of that person in need, just as the Son of God shared in our life.

You see, that is why the Trinity matters, because the Trinity means nothing, if we cannot apply it. And so, this concept of a Triune God is a challenge to all of our neat categories. We can't just put God in a box. Yet what amazes me is that the difficulty we have with the Trinity is precisely its beauty. We struggle with the idea of there being one eternal God, the Lord alone, who is at the same time an eternal community of three in the one Lord. But if God is wholly alone, just a solitary being somewhere else, then God is not perfect, or complete, because God would then need creation to be complete. But instead, if God is eternally a community bound by love, then creation is an act of desire, the result of love overflowing. You are wanted, not needed by God. There's a difference.

Now, this does not mean that upon hearing this you will now never struggle with the concept or have doubts. In our reading, the disciples, "bowed down in worship before him, but some doubted." Now it's easy to read this in English and envision two camps – the first bowing to Jesus – and the second, standing there with their arms crossed and pouting. But I do not think that is what Matthew is describing here. You see, all of the disciples were worshiping, even though, there were some who doubt, who were unsure. These disciples were First Century Jews, who spent their life believing in one God, and now, their friend, who was crucified by Rome, is alive again and they worshiped him.

There are two Greek words in the New Testament that we typically translate as doubt. Over the course of Matthew's 28 chapters, he is the only writer to use both words. We know then that he knows both words, and that he knows what they mean. The first is "*diakrino*" which literally means "to judge through," and this can be used positively to mean discernment, or it can mean to waver by judging one way, then switching to the other. The second word, which is used here is "*distazo*,"

and this means literally to hold two stances, to waver with your feet set in two places, trying to stay connected to both. It's hedging your bets.

The first is "doubt" in the sense of someone jumping back and forth from one side to the other, and the latter is "doubt" in the sense of someone trying to stand on both sides. The disciples in our reading today are trying to understand Jesus in God's identity, and much as we do when we contemplate the Trinity, they are struggling. They worship Jesus, something they reserve only for the God of Israel, and yet, even for them, there is a measure of uncertainty.

These are the ones who saw everything and walked with Jesus during his ministry where he performed many miracles, and now know that he is risen from the dead. Yet, this is their Galilean Two-Step, to push through to faith. This is Matthew's gospel in a nutshell – this is what he is presenting to his readers. Matthew is believed to have been written to a largely Jewish audience and Matthew begins his gospel by calling Jesus, "Emmanuel," or "God with us." Now, he ends with Jesus stating the same truth about his identity, when he says all authority in heaven and earth is his authority. Yes, he is one with God, holding God's own authority, and what's more, the Spirit is one with him also, for Jesus says, "I am with you always." This is the good news. It is the gospel.

My sisters and brothers, if the disciples who walked with Jesus and saw his miracles doubted, then maybe it is understandable for you to also doubt, to hedge your bets, and waver. The opposite of faith is not doubt. The opposite of faith is certainty. It takes a little bit of doubt to have faith and believe what you cannot see. So, just because the disciples did not understand fully then the identity of Jesus in the Trinity, that this teaching is somehow frivolous and irrelevant, but an acknowledgement of its mystery.

By proclaiming the Trinity as we do in our affirmations of faith, we recognize that God not only as the Father and Source, and the Son, the Word which became flesh, is also one with the Spirit that lives in and among us. We can grow in our faith as disciples, trusting in this even if we do not understand it fully and walking with others. The beauty of the Trinity is that the Father, Son, and Spirit, are co-equal, co-eternal, and that we were created from our God's love, and that we are wanted, not needed.

Indeed, we fall short, but that faithful love of God meant sending the Son, to share in our humanity, become part of what was created through him. This was so that he could live in our limits, and when sin and death did all that it could to defeat him, sending him to that cross, he showed that it has no power over him. He rose again for us beginning a new creation, whereby the Spirit, the third person of that Trinity lives in and among us as temples of God's presence. This is our God. This is our example. This is our salvation.

As we go out, let us take seriously our job to disciple, to be a part of each other's lives. This is not to control or manipulate, but to love and serve and reveal God's love to each other and to those whom God puts in our lives, those neighbors we have yet to meet. The Great Commission is not a numbers game, but a commitment, to persevere in our doubt, even if it means doing the Galilean two-step, and worship anyway in order to find our faith in this incredible God, a God who loves us beyond our comprehension, and who knows us by name, walks with us, and is here with us always, even to the completion of the age. God is with us even to the very end of time itself.

The trinity means nothing if we do not apply it, so let us embrace this mystery, not as something to know perfectly and understand to prove to others, but something to strive toward. This is because for whatever reason, this triune God has created us out of love for us, and empowers us with this love, humbly sharing in our life, so that we might walk with others, share in their lives. This way we display the love of God, making disciples of every nation, of every culture, not by forcing one-time decisions, even if we know that must come eventually.

Let us take on the challenge of addressing the needs that are real by sharing life together, even if we still worry that they won't make the decision that will "fix" things later. This is hard. It takes commitment, but I've seen this commitment in this church. I know we understand this comes through fellowship, a common life with one another, but fellowship comes from the Trinity which is God in fellowship with God's own self.

Still, I take comfort that we are not alone, and we have to have faith to trust and do what we can. After all, we must remember that promise from Jesus – He is with us in this endeavor, always, even to the end of the age. Amen.