

“Knowing Who God Is” based on Romans 5:1-11 and Psalm 8

Delivered on Trinity Sunday by Pastor Drew Mangione, June 12, 2022, Shelby Presbyterian Church

Last week, at the end of the service, in the charge, I mentioned my routine with Harrison, which we do every morning. It involves a couple of memory verses. The first is the Great Commandments, “You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Then he recites an Easy-to-Read translation of Romans 12:12, saying, “Be happy because of the hope you have. Be patient in all your troubles. Pray all the time.”

And so, I ask him, “What is the hope we have?” and he says, *“That God wants to be with us.”* Then I ask, “Why do we have that hope?” And he says, *“God came down to be with us.”* “In whom did God come down to be with us?” And he says, *“Jesus.”* “And how is God with us right now?” And he says, *“The Holy Spirit.”* “So, who then is God?” And he says, *“The Father, Son & Holy Spirit.”*

And then I shift gears and ask, “Who is your neighbor?” He says, *“Anyone that God puts in our life.”* And “What is love?” He says, *“Love is a choice.”* He recently started adding, *“It’s a choice to be kind to others, because God loves us.”*

This was not something I scripted, but it developed over time, question by question. In fact, defining love at the end is still in progress, as love is more than just kindness. Sometimes, I ask the questions in different orders, or change them up a little, but all in all, this is the routine, and it’s something I truly enjoy each day. My hope is that we will be able to continue to add to it and try to expand his understanding of his budding faith.

Now, to be clear, I’m not sharing this story as some veiled way to brag about me and my son. I shared it because today is Trinity Sunday and central to both this holy day and our routine is the very identity of the God my son, like all of us, is learning to trust a little more each day.

You see, the Great Commandments are beautiful and foundational, but if we do not know who God is, and then who our neighbor is, then we are free to define a deity on our own terms and who we want God to be. After that, we would be free to narrow down who is our neighbor and make our neighbors who we want them to be, excluding whomever we did not want to love.

And so, the Western Church, across many denominations, both protestant and Catholic, has chosen this single Sunday – the Sunday after the feast of the Pentecost – for us to handle the most fundamental and most complex teaching in our faith. You see, it’s fundamental, because the Trinity defines who God is for us. And it’s complex, because it is a mystery that is not easily explained. And many have tried.

Perhaps you’ve heard about the egg – with its shell, yolk and white – but that is not the Trinity. Maybe you’ve heard the phases of water – liquid, ice, and gas – but that is not it either. Or the shamrock, nope. The roles of a person, nope. All of these lead to some other fundamental misconception the church has rejected because they don’t really explain how our God is three persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – with each one co-equal, co-eternal, and distinct, yet with one will.

Each one has its own mode of generation from their unity – a theological term for how the Father is the source, the Son is sent by the Father, and the Spirit proceeds from Father and Son. Yet, each one takes the lead in certain functions in the dance where the Spirit seems to lead in some spaces, the Son in another, and the Father in a third aspect, but all three share responsibility for all of God’s actions. This is the church’s historic teaching about God, and as it was then, it’s hard to grasp now.

And so, rather than explain it, remember this – the Father loves the Son eternally, and the Son loves the Father eternally, in and through the Holy Spirit. There never was a time when one of these did not exist. There is one will, no hierarchy, complete unity, and yet distinction and community. These three are one in an eternal loving dance and do not need anything. The God of the Christian faith is complete in every way.

This means our God is not some bored, loveless deity doomed to solitude with nothing to do without creation. Nor is our God one of many gods in competition for our love and our service, our attention. Nor is our God distant and far removed, disinterested in who we are. No, the God of the Christian faith made you by choice out of love. You are not needed, nor accidental, but wanted by choice.

Sisters and brothers, if you have tuned out in all of this, please focus right now. If you take away nothing else today, understand this: You are beloved by God by name. You are made in the image of this Triune God and empowered to love. This God has chosen to create by love, and desires you, all of you. That’s it: Loving God and loving neighbor, means loving the God of love. That love is a patient, kind, enduring love that never ever gives up. This is not romantic love that relies on feelings from one day to the next. It’s not a familial love set in feelings and obligations. Nor is it a love of friendship in shared interests. This is a love of choice, commitment and never-failing faithfulness. We then can choose to love God and to love others because God loved us first.

In our passage from Paul’s letter to the Romans, we see the extent of this faithful love, and while Paul’s paragraphs here do not define the Trinity in and of themselves, they do reveal the character of this one God in three persons through this love. You see we are justified by faith, or made right with God by faithfulness, and this is not an action of our own, but a gift given by God to us. This is given through God’s own faithfulness to us, and so we have peace. This peace is not as the world gives, but is the right and proper order of God, the absence of confusion and chaos in God’s will, which is given to us through our Lord Jesus.

Lest you think Paul is separating the two – God and Jesus – he calls Jesus “our Lord.” The Lord is the name substituted for the name of God in the Hebrew Scriptures. And so, our Lord Jesus, who is also our earthly promised Messiah, our brother, human like us, is also divine and gives us admission by faith, or faithfulness, into grace, or unmerited favor. Every one of us is adopted by God, in and through the actions of Jesus, the Father’s rightful inheritor, gives it to us. He shared in our humanity, died for us, and rose again for us. This is why we hold our heads high. It is not our accomplishment, but as God shared in our life in Jesus, we share in God’s life in him.

Yet, like any good infomercial salesman, Paul says to the Romans...But wait, there's more. Paul says God is not just giving you the divine and human natures of Jesus of Nazareth here. Because as amazing as that is: he has ascended, is gone and we are under pressure. Can you imagine being in the early church wondering what to do when you cannot see Jesus anymore? We have trials and tribulations in this world, and we can't do it alone. But this pressure produces endurance, and this endurance, well, it produces a tested character that then produces hope. Why don't our trials and suffering then put us to shame? It's because we are not alone – we have God's Spirit in us and among us, pouring the love of God into our hearts every day. When we recognize that love in us, we can share this love.

This kind of talk about a personal and loving God, a God who acts first, shows who God is. God's identity flows from out of the Trinity, which reveals our God's choice to love us. And so, just as Paul talks about the Trinity before the word Trinity was made up, so too, we see the Psalmist, traditionally thought to be David, shows us God's identity in this unique love God has for us.

And just as Paul writes that in our weakness the Messiah came for the ungodly, so too, the Psalmist marvels that the Lord would be mindful of a mere mortal. The word translated as mortal here is sometimes also translated as "man," but it is a word drawn from the Hebrew word for 'weakness.' Likewise, Paul marvels that the Lord knows the "son of Adam," which I have translated as "the earthling's child," because this is our special place as humans, formed from the earth, from dirt, and given life by God's breath, God's Spirit. But also, the first earthling, the first Adam, is the one who sinned first.

And so, this is both our sinfulness and God's demonstration of love in full view. It is a preview of what Paul said: "While we were still sinners, the Messiah died for us." The Psalm shows the love of God and the special place given to humanity. Why would God be mindful of and care for us, and give us God's own image? Because this is how God demonstrates the love God has for us. The stronghold of God is not merely divine power, but expressed by babies, infants.

This is meant both as literal children, but also to represent the dependent believer. And the word for Adversary here is a word meaning those who constrain, bind. These Adversaries are those who seek to bind the Lord, to limit the Lord. These are those who say Israel's God is not the one True God, or those who would say this God does not exist, and those who think this one True God is real, but isn't enough, and is not powerful enough to trust fully. These are those who think we need more to cling to.

God's stronghold established by these babies causes the silence of the enemy and avenger. This is not a proper noun "enemy" or "avenger" as if to be names for the Satan or Devil. Rather, God's stronghold or strength silences both the enemy from without, and the avenger from within, who seeks violence in retribution against that enemy. The God of Israel uses the lowly to break the cycle of violence, to establish this stronghold, or strength, not to annihilate, but to cause the silence of both the enemy against us and our desire to avenge what has been done to us.

The Psalmist writes singularly, with language that could be translated as "him" or "the one." From this, we can know that God sees us, is mindful of us, and cares for us as individuals. But

likewise, this singular language is also an allusion to the Messiah, because only Jesus is the one who has truly lived into this vision fully. God made us to be close to God, a little lower than God, in order to, as the Psalmist said, reign over the works of God's hands. We are supposed to have all things under us, yet we fall victim to worshipping the things that are created.

Indeed, "whatever our hearts cling to and confide in," as Martin Luther said, "is really our god." So, we fall victim to clinging to and depending on things like our wealth, popularity, power and security. We worship the things of creation, rather using them to share in God's work of creation. When we say our great commands are to "love God and to love neighbor," we need to know first who our God is – the God of the Trinity – the One God who desires all of us, knows us and loves us.

And with that, we also need to know who our neighbor is and not limit the power of this love God has given us. We did not read it today, but Jesus answers this in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. He says our neighbor is anyone whom God puts in our path, regardless of their tribe, regardless of whether the person is from a rival sect or ideology, regardless of whether the person would make us 'unclean.' Our neighbor is not only our kin, or people we choose. Our neighbor is anyone who God puts in our path, and knowing this, our calling is to choose, not who is worthy of love, but choose to love all.

And so, our challenge, on this Trinity Sunday, is to try to take all this theology and scripture, and make it meaningful and practical to our lives, so we can "love God and neighbor." What does it mean that we proclaim a Triune God? One God in three persons? It means that our God is complete, and we were made through love. We are not needed by this God, but wanted by a personal God, who is not far off, but sends the Spirit to live in and among us, pouring love in our hearts, so that when we recognize it, we can share that love in the world around us.

The love God has for us is both individual and it is corporate, and so the great commandments are both for us as individuals, and it is corporate, so we can do greater things together. I pray that my routine with Harrison instills this in him, and I pray this for you too: That you would know the hope of God wanting to be with us, grounded in God having come down to be with us in Jesus, and strengthened by God's presence with us now in the Spirit.

By this we know our God is the Holy Trinity. Our God is not an overused generic 3-letter word, G-O-D that we throw around just about anywhere with a capital G and somehow think by doing so that we are being holy. No, Christian faith is knowing God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and letting the love God has for us lead us to love every human being we meet. That can certainly be hard. So, friends, be empowered by the Spirit pouring love in your hearts and use it for more than just your own personal piety. Use this love by sharing it with your neighbors. indeed, anyone God puts in your path. Amen.