

“So, What Type of God Do You Believe In? The Trinity”

Matthew 28:16-20/II Corinthians 13:11-13/Psalm 96:1-6

1st Presbyterian Church of Sharon

May 31, 2026-Trinity Sunday

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I. Introduction

So how would you describe God? What do you believe?

Some of the church staff are reading and discussing the book *The Meaning of Jesus* co-authored by Marcus Borg and N.T. Wright. Wright begins his chapter on “The Divinity of Jesus” with this story.

Wright 1—For 7 years I was college chaplain at Worcester College, Oxford. Each year I would see first year undergraduate students individually. It was just a quick visit. I wanted to welcome them and make a first acquaintance.

Student 1—I was happy to meet Dr. Wright. But I had to tell him with some embarrassment, “You won’t be seeing me much. You see, I really don’t believe in God.”

W 2—I started to hear that a number of times, so I developed a type of stock response. I ask, “Oh that’s interesting. Tell me which god you don’t believe in.”

S 2—“What?” Dr. Wright’s response surprised me. I said, “You know, God. The “big-G” God. Some type of being who lives in the sky, looks down on us critically, does a miracle once in a while, sends good people to heaven and bad people to hell. I don’t believe in that type of god.”

W 3—I had heard that plenty of times also, so I developed another stock response. I said, “Well, I’m not surprised you don’t believe in that type of god. I don’t believe in that god either.”

S 3—Dr. Wright surprised me again. He was the chaplain and he didn’t believe in God. And then I remembered I was told that half of the chaplains at Oxford were atheists. I smiled. Dr. Wright must be one of those.

W 4—“No, I don’t believe in the type of god you just described. Rather I believe in the God I see revealed in Jesus of Nazareth. And that God is different and much more interesting than the god you know from media and western mainstream culture.”

S 4—“What do you mean different...and interesting?”

W 5—And so I would tell the NOW curious student a little about what Jesus reveals to us about God.

So what type of god do you believe in? Is it like the student; up in the sky, does an occasional miracle, sends people to heaven or hell? Or maybe it's a god more like the forces of nature, or some type of energy in all of creation like "the force" in the Star Wars movies? Or maybe it's a god who keeps some type of "moral account book" on us all, and with too many "bad marks" you'll call hell your final home? Or maybe the god who's like a benign old grandfather, there to pat you on the head and give you an encouraging word? Or maybe the opposite; a holy, awesome, frightening god from whom you keep a distance? Or maybe a creator god who built the universe like a clock, and now just sits back and watches it run? Or...or...or?

So what type of god do you believe in? The answer usually comes as some type of combination of what we understand, and what we believe, and the experiences we have in life, and how we see the world and our lives.

Today is Trinity Sunday. When you hear that you may be thinking, "Well this is going to be thick theology that gives me a headache." And there is that with the Trinity. As the Church wanted to get more precise with its theological discussions on the nature of God, the divinity of Jesus and the Trinity conversations did get "thick." The 4th C Council of Nicaea used the difficult Greek terms of "true God of true God," "begotten not made," "and "of the same substance as the Father" to describe the nature of Jesus. And under the orders of Emperor Constantine, they wrote the Nicene Creed. Pondering that creed gives me a headache.

But early in the life of the Church that was not the point. When they discussed the Trinity, they were not using difficult academic language and concepts to describe God. Rather the Trinity was a way to describe the God they had come to trust. It was a way to share how they experienced God. Amidst all the Greek and Roman and pagan gods, the Trinity was a way for those 1stC Christians to answer NT Wright's question; "Tell me about the God you believe in." In simple ways, "the Trinity" was their answer. And so on this Trinity Sunday we'll take a look at that (and save "the headaches" of discussing the Nicene Creed for another day).

The Trinity. We begin with one. One God. The earliest Christians were Jewish, and they were strict monotheists. One God. As compared to the Romans and Greeks and pagans who had many gods, the Jews had one God. It is most clearly stated and repeated and memorized in Deuteronomy 6:4; "Hear, O Israel; The Lord is our God, the Lord alone." It's called the "Shema." One God. It's elaborated on in Psalm 96:5, our Call to Worship: "For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the Lord made the heavens." So not only is there one God, but this God is the only God. All other gods are only idols. The Trinity begins with one God.

Furthermore, those first Jewish Christians believed in the one God they knew through the reading and study of the Old Testament. And they knew this one God through religious practices; Sabbath observance, dietary law, circumcision, and gathering in a synagogue. And they knew this one God through sacrifices and worship and the priests at the Temple.

And so those earliest Jewish Christians began with one God. And when the gentiles became followers of Jesus, they left their many gods for the belief in one God.

And then a surprising thing happened. Those followers of Jesus began, somehow, to experience the mysterious presence of God in Jesus Christ. Somehow in Jesus' miracles and healings and teaching and preaching and praying, they began to wonder if God was present in what Jesus did and who Jesus was in a special way. And the more they pondered Jesus' discussions about being God's Messiah and Savior, the more they began to see the work of God in what Jesus was doing. At the cross all of that came to an end. But in the experiences and stories of the risen Christ, it became even clearer to them that to see and know Jesus was to see and know God in some mysterious ways. The one, holy, all-powerful, creator God was present in Jesus.

And then more surprises happened. The Holy Spirit of God, the power and breath of God, the source of life and new life "blew" into the lives of believers and into the life and mission of the Church. The Spirit of God that had moved over the face of the deep, bringing creation and light and life now brought new life to those who followed Jesus. And through the gift of the Holy Spirit, people began to have more experiences with the risen Christ and more visions and dreams of God. And in those experiences with the Holy Spirit, people began to believe that, too, was an experience with the one God.

And so very early in the history of the Church and Christian theology, people began to explain the God they believed in as one God, known through experience and Bible and belief as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Sometimes that "three in one" is expressed as "love, grace, and fellowship." And sometimes it's expressed as "Creator, Savior, and Sustainer." We hear this in the texts from Matthew 28 and II Corinthians 13. One God, experienced in three mysterious ways.

III. Brief Theological Reflection

So, tell me about the God you believe in. The Trinity was the response of the early Christians. It would become a deeply philosophical and academic answer in the centuries to come. But early on it was a simple way to describe belief and experience; one holy God who creates, saves, and remains with us.

Sometimes analogies are used to explain the Trinity. They all work with the one in three idea. Water can be a solid/ice, a liquid/water, and a gas/steam. And one person like me can be a son, a father, and a grandfather. One and three. Both are helpful, I think.

But this is more helpful for me now. I grew up in the eastern side of Washington State. And in eastern Washington State it is hot in the summer. As a kid we lived a little west of Spokane surrounded by wheat ranches. My maternal grandfather was a wheat rancher. And then in my teenage years we moved north into the mountains. But it was still hot in the summer. It

was, and still is, weeks in the 90s. We didn't have air conditioning. I never liked the heat and still don't. But I was glad my bedroom was always in the basement.

And I remember a number of times during the heat of the summer we would take a vacation and drive west to the Seattle area. We drove west on I-90 through the wheat ranches and high desert scrubble and the apple orchards over Snoqualmie Pass to the much cooler oceans and beaches of the Seattle area. And I loved it. I could feel the temperature drop as we came down the westside of the pass.

And as a kid finally on the ocean I loved the cool breezes and winds off the ocean. And I loved the sound and feel of the waves as they broke on the rocks and sandy beaches. And I loved exploring in tidal pools for fish and crabs and starfish.

So if you asked me as a kid or a teenager what I enjoyed about the ocean I would have said the cool breezes and the sound and feel of the waves and marine life in the tidal pools. One ocean and three ways to describe my experience. I suppose if I had a marine biology class and an oceanography class I could have said more, something more academic. But how I described my experience was true enough. It was one ocean, and three different but connected experiences.

And maybe, what I'm suggesting this morning, is that the Trinity is a little like that. It's a way to describe experiences with the one God. Sure we can take classes and do some reading and do some thinking and say more. But how we describe our experience with one God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit...love, grace, and fellowship...is still true enough. That's the God to believe in...and hope in...and love.