

Next week is our annual mission Sunday, where we celebrate how God is working through this congregation to bring hope to our community. The reason next Sunday is so important is that it speaks to the very core of who we are. So today, to prepare us for next week, I want to consider with you what it means to be human:

According to the Scriptures, that created purpose is found in the very nature of God. In describing the creation of the first two humans, Genesis 1 tells us this:

God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. -- Genesis 1:26-27 (NLT)

We have been created for a particular purpose. You don't have to live according to that purpose - but that's like using a lawnmower to wash your dishes: dangerous, difficult, probably painful and just not a great idea. If we want a full, meaningful life, we must embrace the reason we were created. We must learn how to live the way we were created to life.

Genesis 1 tells us that we were created in God's image. That means that somehow, who we are, our truest Selves, is a reflection of who God is. So the obvious question we need to ask is, Who is God? What is God's nature? Once we know that, we're in a position to determine how we are a reflection of God's nature. So who is God?

According to the Scriptures and Church tradition, the most basic, essential answer to the question, Who is God? is that God is the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity is *the* defining Christian doctrine. When I talk to my Muslim friends, my Mormon friends, my Hindu or Jewish friends, this is *the* belief that sets us apart from everyone else. Understanding that God is Trinity is what makes us Christian and not anything else. In fact, for churches all over the world, today is Trinity Sunday, the day we set aside to celebrate and discuss and worship God as Trinity.

Most basically, the doctrine of the Trinity says that God is a single being comprised of three persons (**Trinity symbol that we'll use for all the graphics, then 1=3**). Those three persons - the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (which we talked about last week) are all equal and eternal. The Father didn't create the Son and the Spirit. And the Father doesn't rule over the Son and the Spirit - as though they're sidekicks or functionaries who do the Father's bidding. All three persons are equal and eternal. What's true of one Person of the Trinity is true of the other two as well. What one Person does, all three do. (**maybe arrows superimposed on the Trinity symbol highlighting the multi-directional giving of the Trinity?**)

You can see why the Trinity is a doctrine that gets less time than it deserves: it's really confusing. The way theologians talk about the Trinity can be so intimidating, many Christians just throw up their hands and ignore God-as-Trinity altogether. And that's truly dangerous because we're ignoring who God truly is, who the Scriptures reveal God to be.

Ever wonder why so many people have gotten the impression that God's an angry, vindictive deity? It's because we've forgotten the Trinity. Or why so many today think that God is a distant, unconcerned grandfatherly figure? We forgot the Trinity. Why so many have reduced Jesus to just

some good moral teacher whose death was tragic but ultimately meaningless? We forgot the Trinity. And why - as we talked about last week - don't we have a clue what we're supposed to believe about the Holy Spirit? We forgot the Trinity.

And we're made *in the image* of this triune God! When we forget who *God* is, we lose the picture of who *we* really are, who we're called to be. We hold our lives like that can-opener. We know they're supposed to *mean* something. We know deep in our bones that there's some right way to live, but we can't figure out what that way *is*.

So for the sake of the Church, for the sake of our souls, for the sake of humanity, let's spend a little more time on what it means to say that God is Trinity:

The New Testament tells us that God is most basically, most essentially self-giving love. I want to spend most of our time together in 1 John 4 today. Turn there with me in your Bible. If you grabbed one of our Bibles on the way in, it's on page XXX. Please keep that Bible with our complements!

We're going to read a larger passage in a few minutes, but I want to direct your attention to verse 4:8 for a moment. Here, the writer tells us that **God is love. -- 1 John 4:8 (NLT)**. Now, just saying that "God is love" isn't all that helpful. Love is one of those words that has about a thousand definitions. But the same person who wrote this letter also wrote the Gospel of John, and in that book, Jesus gives us a working definition of what he means by love:

There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. -- John 15:13

When Jesus talks about love - the greatest love, the love that is the core of who God is - he defines that love as the giving away of the Self. In other words, God is most fundamentally a giver. God is most fully God when God is giving Godself away to someone else. We see that in the Cross - when we had sold ourselves into slavery to Sin, God gave up his position in Heaven to become one of us. He spent his whole earthly life in poverty, giving and teaching and healing. And then, he gave his very Self, his life, up for us, choosing to die to rescue us from the mess we made for ourselves.

Everything we have is ultimately a gift from God. Even what we've "earned" for ourselves is truly a gift, because the energy I used to work to earn I have because of food I've been given. Breath I've been given. Life that I did nothing to earn or gain. God, as the Bible says, is the source of every good gift.

God is Love, and Love is giving. God is a giver. **(graphic)**

So wait. Is God Trinity or so God Love? They're really two sides of the same coin: imagine with me that God were not Trinity, that God were - as our Muslim or Mormon friends believe - only one. **(image: God on blackness)** If God is only one, and God is a giver, then God *needs* creation. Because a giver can't give without a receiver. **(maybe an arrow with a question mark?)** If God is one, then God *must* create. God *needs* creation in order to be fully himself.

And then you end up with a codependent deity. Because if God *needs* creation, then God is not free to love. God requires us to love back, to receive God's gifts. If we don't, then God can't fully

be God. In this picture of God, God is a very needy deity, one prone to wrath and judgment against those who don't do things his way.

But if God is three *and* one, then God is free to love. Because God doesn't *need* creation to be God. The Father can give to the Spirit and the Son. And the Son to the Spirit and the Father and the Spirit to the Father and the Son. All three can give, all three can receive *inside* of Godself. God doesn't need anyone or anything else to be God, to be fully Godself. (the trinity and arrows again)

So God doesn't *need* us, doesn't need creation. God created us out of freedom, out of joy, not out of compulsion or necessity. And that freedom is very good news for us. In fact, the freedom to give, the freedom to love, is *the* difference between the old, dying way of the broken creation that's passing away and the new creation, God's kingdom, that's bursting forth in the midst right now.

When we are trapped in Sin, we're not free to give. We're not free at all. We're slaves to our selfishness, to our own desires. We see the whole world as a competition, a showdown between Us and Them. We can't afford to be generous because we're afraid there's not enough to go around. That they're coming after ours and I have to protect me and mine.

But when Jesus died and rose from the dead, he freed us to join in the Trinity's sacred, self-giving life. The night he was betrayed, Jesus prayed over his disciples. Listen to these words he prayed over them - and us:

I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me. I have given them the glory you gave me, so they may be one as we are one. I am in them and you are in me. May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me. -- John 17:20-23

May they be one - the same way you and I are one. May they experience perfect unity. Because when they do, they will be an *image* of us to the world. Jesus frees us to join God in giving.

God is a giver. We are created in God's image. That means we are most fully ourselves when we learn to give the way God gives. When we become sacrificial the way Jesus was sacrificial.

In other words, God gives us gifts so we can be givers.

If you saw someone washing dishes with a lawnmower, you'd laugh (or call an ambulance). That's a silly example, but many of us feel the same way about our lives. We've been going along, trying to figure it out and we can't figure it out. We know what we're doing, and it's not bad, but it's not *great*. You're getting stuff done, but you *know* there's a better way. We have that aching sense that there's got to be something more, something we're missing.

Look back at 1 John 4 with me, as the author paints a picture of that better way for us:

Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is

love. God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins. Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us. And God has given us his Spirit as proof that we live in him and he in us. -- 1 John 4:7-13 (NLT)

God gives to us to invite us to give. God loves us as an invitation to love. So the question before us today is: what will you give?

Many of us respond to this question by saying, Nothing. I don't have anything to give. Money, talents, resources. I'm poor. Financially poor. Poor in character. Poor in Spirit. We believe we can't afford to be generous.

I want to tell you about a woman named Milan, who's the best image of the Trinity I've ever met (and I've told you about her before, but I can never tell her story enough). About 4 years ago, I had the opportunity to travel with a micro-finance organization called HOPE International to observe their work in the Dominican Republic. While I was there, I met an astounding woman named Milan. (pic)

Milan had always dreamed of running a school - most students in the DR can't afford the uniforms they have to buy even to attend a public school. And Milan was no better off than any of her neighbors. Most have no electricity or running water, and live in homes with dirt floors.

Through HOPE, Milan used a micro-loan to start her own home business and was successful enough to achieve her dream: she started a school in her home. Both AM and PM classes quickly filled to capacity, so Milan began saving for a larger home. After a few years, she was able to buy a larger home, and expand her school, which quickly reached capacity again.

It was at this point Milan began dreaming of an actual school building. She and HOPE turned down a massive donation from American businesses to finance the school because they didn't want to build the school with handouts. Instead, Milan went to her community and said, We're going to build a school for our children. So give money to help us build it. If you can't give money, then you help build the school. If you can't build, then you cook food for the workers. No one is too poor to give.

No one is too poor to give. That became Milan's mantra, the mantra that built her school. By the time I met her, Milan was finishing her college degree and serving as the principle of the best-run school in the DR, a school to which the government was sending their principles and teachers to learn how Milan ran such a great school. And it's still full to capacity - both morning and afternoon classes. And Milan was dreaming of a third story, so she could educate even more students.

And all of it done without a single donation from outsiders. Milan's school wasn't the American school that handouts built. It was her community's school, built by the blood, sweat and sacrifice of her community. Parents sent their kids there because they *built* that school so by God you *will* go to it.

And this in a country where most people live on less than a dollar a day. In a community that didn't have utilities. All because Milan knew that *no one* is too poor to give. Milan gave and gave and gave. The way she gave invited *other people* to join in giving. That's giving like God. That's being the image of the Trinity in the world.

So what do you have?

We must ask ourselves the same question Milan asked her community. What do you have? What will you contribute to God's work here in Beavercreek?

Next week is our annual Mission Sunday, when we celebrate what God is doing in our community through this church. And part of our celebration next week is that we give 100% of the offerings we collect next week to support the various missions we're doing both here and around the globe.

But we're also raising the bar on what a mission is. We believe the Church isn't on mission until each of us is on mission, because *we* are the Church.

In the bulletin this week are some old-school pledge cards with the theme of our summer – MyMission (**graphic?**) – on them. We're asking to you consider prayerfully how you will give over the next year to the BCN community.

The first aspect of giving to consider (and the most obvious) is financial giving. How will you choose to give back to God from your financial resources?

I'm also going to challenge you to think beyond your finances. What skills, talents and gifts do you have that you could share with others here or in our community? Maybe you're like those in Milan's community who built the school. Or those who cooked for the builders. What can you contribute above and beyond your finances? How can you share your Self with your church community?

Take this card with you this week and consider those questions carefully and prayerfully. Bring them back next week to be a part of our Mission Sunday celebration!

Sharing who you are is fundamentally who God is, what it means for God to be Trinity. We were created in that God's image, to be sharers. If we refuse to share, refuse to give, then we are not only denying God's work in our lives, we're denying our own true selves.

You were created to be a giver. So start giving!! Give so your giving invites others to join in giving with you!!

Communion SetUp

Of all weeks to celebrate the Communion Meal, this Trinity Sunday is good. Because today we celebrate Jesus' ultimate gift. We remember that when Jesus gave us his life and then rose again, he opened the Way back to God. Now, because of what this table celebrates, we can be One with God. We can share in the life of the Holy Trinity, experience the oneness of God with God and with each other.

When we take the wafer, we remember that Jesus' body was broken for us, for our sinfulness, for the wars within our souls and with each other.

And when we dip it in the grape juice, we remember that Jesus' blood was poured out to make peace between us and God. Jesus' death restored our relationship with God.

It is through this table that we are freed to give the way God gives to us. The meal we eat here reminds us that God has invited us to share in the life of the Trinity, and to share that life with others, just like God shares it with us.

So when we come to eat this meal, we remember his death and look forward to the final resurrection, the end of all war and the final reign of peace!