

## 2020-06-07 The Day of Pentecost

### *Trinity and Transformation*

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Pastor Scott Austin

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott Austin]

“One alone is lonely and self-centered, two together are still in opposition, inviting favoritism, three are a dance.” I found those words in Richard Rohrs book [The Divine Dance](#), which is a book about the Trinity. And today is Trinity Sunday on the Christian calendar. It's the day when Christians around the world reflect on the idea that God is both three and one: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. On one hand, so what? Look at the world around us. Read the room, pastor! Black people being murdered on video, charges only filed after that video becomes public, police forces running through American cities in military gear and military vehicles that once ran through the streets of Fallujah or Kabul, bad actors taking advantage of the chaos by rioting and looting, burning their own cities without regard to the cause of justice. That's to say nothing of the fact that we are still dealing with a global pandemic, a disease that has killed over 110000 Americans, so far (I updated that number today, it said 100000 in my notes until just now), a disease that is now beginning to surge in Africa, Latin America, and South Asia. And in all of that, pastor, you want to talk about the Trinity today?! You want to talk about some obscure theological concept that most of us don't understand, some abstract way of describing God -- a God who seems distant, maybe even absent right now? The world is burning and you want to dust off a pointless seminary idea? Is that your idea of a distraction?

I would forgive you for asking those questions. But the answer is, yes, I do want to talk about Trinity today, but, no, I don't think it's a distraction, I don't think it's pointless, I don't think it's a sign or symbol of God's absence or distance; quite the contrary. It's my firm belief that our theology informs our worldview even when we don't realize it. What we think about God affects what we think about everything and everyone else. And I believe that there are aspects of Trinitarian theology that the church has ignored or neglected or forgotten for years, many centuries, in fact, in some cases, and that losing these ways of understanding and describing who God is has come at a great cost to our worldview. And yes, I believe that that cost to our worldview has made our society's current problems much worse. In some cases that loss of theological understanding and that loss of worldview has been the cause of some of our

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problems, even the problems we're facing right now. And because I believe all of that is true, the answer to some of those questions is yes, I am going to talk about this abstract theological concept today, even while the world burns. God is one, yet God is three: Father Son and Holy Spirit.

Now, I'm going to say a quick word about the gendered language around the Trinity, because although Father and Son are both named in the Trinity I don't believe that God is male, right. And it might be more comfortable for you to substitute other words in those places: parent, child, spirit. I'm going to retain that traditional formalized language because I think some of what I am about to say might sort of redeem some of the overtaking of Trinitarian theology by patriarchy. Ok, so just be aware, I'm not ignoring that reality, that's how I'm approaching it today. And, as a final caveat, I know that this is still zoom and I know that our minds are all on very important things and I'm promising to do my very best to talk about this in a concise and clear way. And I'll make you a deal: I won't talk about the Trinity as if I'm giving a PhD thesis so long as you don't grade me on my talking about the Trinity as if I was giving a PhD thesis.

So I'm going to try to talk about this in two ways, two meanings that God as Trinity give us, because, remember, the principle at play here is that what we believe about God has consequences for how we view ourselves, how we view humanity, how we view our whole world. And obviously there are more than two things that we could say about the Trinity, but I'm choosing two that feel particularly important and timely for us right now.

So here's the first one: the first idea, the first theological meaning that we can get from Trinity has to do with the cross. I'll say it this way, if God is Trinity, then the Father and the Son are always one with the spirit and the Father therefore cannot be separate from the Son on the cross. Why does that matter? Well, there's a very popular idea in Christianity -- and I would say that in American Christianity it's almost the only idea about salvation -- that the Son is on the cross to protect us from the Father. Jesus, in that case, it's as if he is our asbestos suit against the flames of God's wrath, right, but that idea cannot stand up to Trinitarian theology. A true Trinitarian would take one look at that idea of God being split apart at the moment of the crucifixion and say, "nope. Back to the drawing board because that can't be what we're seeing because that is not who we understand God to be." They would say, "no, in fact, Christ on the cross reveals the true nature of God." In other words, the Son reveals the heart of the Father, which is loving humanity non-stop, endlessly, even to the point of his own death at the hands of his enemies. And a Trinitarian would say that this revelation continues to this day through the work of the Holy Spirit, even in the physical absence of God. That is Trinity. But, we have lost

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the Trinity, we have dismembered the Godhead and the cost to our theology and to our worldview has been immeasurable.

Because, if you believe that you are saved, not by the love of God, but from the wrath of God, if you believe that only Jesus separated from the Father on the cross can save you from the death sentence that you deserve, if you understand salvation to be mainly about crime and punishment, if you believe that salvation is something best described by a harsh judicial system where the Trinity is split apart, seated in different chairs in a courtroom with the Father seated behind the bench as judge and the Son seated in the defendant's chair, where you belong, if you believe all of that is the best way to describe our salvation, then you might not object to a little bit of police violence, as long as it's meted out against a true criminal. You're not going to object to the mass incarceration of Black and brown people in our country, you are not going to object to children being separated from their parents, to families being dismembered, because you're going to say -- maybe you wouldn't say it out loud but in the depths of your heart -- you're going to believe that the punishment for sin is eternal torture. And what is putting a man in a cage or an electric chair compared to that?

By the way, this is not strictly speaking about the Trinity, but I need to tell you the Bible does not say that the punishment for sin is eternal torture, it says that the wages of sin are death, as in you're going to get paid out for the work you've done. The punishment is built into the crime, so if you're working for death you're going to get it, figuratively, allegorically, literally, spiritually, all of the above. If that's your worldview, if that's your view of salvation, you are furthermore not going to see those who hand out harsh punishment in a negative light. In fact, you might begin to see them in a positive light. You might begin to see the punishers as inherently divine: the harsher the punishment the more like God the judge must be. If what I've just said is incredibly challenging to you, I understand, and I would recommend, if you haven't read it already, to pick up Dominique Gilliard's book [Rethinking Incarceration](#). He traces out very effectively how the history of that kind of salvation theology has led our country to the place that it has found itself with regards to our criminal justice system. In other words, if harsh punishment is baked into your theological worldview it's going to get baked into your society's criminal justice system and that's exactly what's happened in America.

Ok, I just dumped a whole truckload on to you, but that was part one, that was the first idea that Trinity gives us. Here's the second idea that I think good Trinitarian theology gives us that's appropriate for our time: if God is Trinity, then the incarnation of Jesus is truly an enmeshing of humanity and divinity. If God is Trinity, the incarnation means that God is among us in our humanity and that we are also among God in Christ's divinity. And if that's true, then whenever

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you look into the eyes of any human being, you are looking into the very image and likeness of God, you are looking at a miraculous vessel of God's Spirit bearing fruit and gifts that are intended for the blessing of the whole world. You are witnessing both the commonality of everyone being made in God's image and the beautiful diversity, the difference, the variations in humanity that are profound because they are a reflection of the variation and diversity and difference that exists in God as a community, three in one. Because God became a human person, took on a human body, all human persons, all human bodies are sacred, they're holy, they're divine. And if we were truly to internalize that truth it would change everything, not only on the relatively superficial level of how we view people who are different from us, but on a whole world level: how we see our friends, our families, our coworkers, our enemies, our neighbors, fellow citizens, people from different countries. If the Trinity informed our anthropology, we'd be in a much better place.

So, again, that's just two ideas. We could talk about the Trinity a long, long time. It's a profound and difficult-to-understand concept. I recognize that I'm just scratching the surface of understanding it myself; you might just be beginning to understand the Trinity yourself. I guess I encourage you to steep yourself in that mystery, let it seep into you.

And I'll conclude with some words from John Chapter 14. These are words of Jesus and if you want to meditate on the Trinity this week, I encourage you to read John Chapter 14, Trinity is all through that chapter. Here's what Jesus says: "I have said these things to you while I'm still with you, but the advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid." I love that word remind, if you take the word remind and break it apart it says "re" "mind". So in this Trinitarian passage in John 14, Jesus gives the promise that the Holy Spirit will "re mind" us, it will give us a new way of understanding when we know the Holy Spirit. The Spirit will allow us to continually live into the love of the Father as revealed in the life and the words and the death and the resurrection of the Son. So, on this Trinity Sunday, with the world in so much chaos, with so much pain, with so much suffering, may we embrace this "re minding," this understanding of in the depth of love that is the triune God, may we be transformed by the Trinity. Amen.

Let me pray for us and then we have another song to sing together before we close our service. Almighty God, Holy parent, Holy Child, Holy Spirit, may we know you as good father, as loving Son, as mysterious Spirit. May we reclaim and redeem this profound mystery, this tiny glimpse of understanding of who you are. May it change our minds about what the world is supposed to

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be like, about who we are supposed to be. Holy Spirit, remind us of the promises of the Son, the love of the Father. It's in the name of the Triune God that we pray. Amen.

[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information, visit us at [ArtisanChurch.com](https://www.ArtisanChurch.com).