

# Graffiti



*The words that define our faith have the potential to embody the beauty and mystery of our faith. But all too often, they instead become boundary markers, marking who is welcome and who is not. In this series, we seek to recover the beauty of these words, and through them, the beauty and power of the faith into which God has invited us.*

## Which God? Why Trinity?

If there's any word in our culture that has too many definitions and meanings, it's probably 'God'. Everyone has their own definition, their own ideas of who God is. Muslims claim to worship 'God' (that's what the word 'Allah' means). Hindus worship many different gods. Plenty of people claim to believe in a higher power they call God, but who doesn't look much like the God of the Bible. And of course Christians claim to worship the one true God who created everything.

And we all use that word... 'god'. Of course, this isn't a new problem - humanity has been worshipping different gods as long as we've been religious. So the Scriptures spend quite a lot of time on the question of 'Which god are we talking about?'. God first reveals his name as "Yahweh", which means "I am".

Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" -- Exodus 3:13-14

So we learn that the Israelites don't just worship any god. This god has a name - he is Yahweh. And for Israel, there was one truth about their god, one truth about Yahweh that was more important than every other. They call that truth the Shemah, and even today the Jewish people say it every morning and every evening:

"Hear, O Israel: Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone." -- Deuteronomy 6:4

The way most translations render it is "Hear, O Israel: the LORD is our God, the LORD is one." (bring this up under the previous verse, so they can be read side-by-side)

This is a call to worship only Yahweh. To recognize that God is the only god. None of the other gods out there are the one true god. We can understand that. We can wrap our brains around it.

And that was all well and good until Jesus came along. Then Jesus made some troubling statements, said some things that threw a wrench into how we understood God.

Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am." -- John 8:58

Later, he said, "The Father and I are one." -- John 10:30

These aren't subtle statements. Jesus wasn't speaking in code. Everyone who was listening understood clearly that he was claiming to be God. And if that weren't enough, Jesus also spoke of the Holy Spirit as a person who was not the Father, but was also God.

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." -- Matthew 28:19

So Jesus' followers, the first Christians, were left with a peculiar puzzle. They knew that God is one - that there's only one God. But they also knew that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all that One True God. How were they supposed to make sense of it?

If your head is spinning a little right now, don't feel dumb. It took the earliest Christians over 300 years to work out all the implications of this doctrine. How could they express this mystery in a good, helpful and safe way?

What they came up with was what we call now the doctrine of the Trinity. And it *is* a mystery. It doesn't make complete sense. All our attempts to wrap our brains all the way will fail (and that's not a bad thing - if God is really God, we probably ought not to be able to explain him completely. People who claim they understand God completely scare me a little bit). What the doctrine of the Trinity does is give us some helpful and safe ways to talk about who God is, even if we can't ever understand God completely.

So what is Trinity? It's this: God is made up of three separate, fully independent persons (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) that are also One. They're fully equal (there's no hierarchy or rank).

It's helpful also to say what Trinity is NOT.

Some try to explain the Trinity by saying, "Well, I'm a husband, son and brother. I'm one person, but I play three different roles or functions". That is NOT what Trinity is. Trinity says, yes God is One, but God is also Three. Not three roles, but three separate, distinct individual persons.

Some try to explain the Trinity by saying, "Well all three have different jobs. The Father creates, the Son saves and the Spirit sustains." This is basically tritheism or polytheism - saying that we just have three gods who all work together like the Avengers or a football team. All three Persons are One - they all create, they all save and they all sustain (and a bunch of other stuff).

Trinity means God is One AND God is Three. Both. At the same time. All the time.

If that all sounds like a bunch of theological mumbo-jumbo, I sympathize with you. But talking about God as Trinity - being very careful with how we understand who Yahweh is, actually brings the whole story of the scriptures into better focus. One of Jesus' earliest followers wrote a letter exploring the nature of God, and in it, he makes this profound statement:

God is love. -- 1 John 4:8

This is God's essence. When you strip away all the other amazing and incredible and mysterious things about Yahweh, who he is and what he does, at the very core, the bare-bones truth, is that God is love. And love is one of those words that has about a hundred definitions, but the same author that called God Love also gave us a definition of love in his account of Jesus' life.

He said, *No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends* -- John 15:13

This LOVE is self-sacrifice, the giving of the self for the good of the Other. God's fundamental nature, God's true self, is Love. God is most fully God when God *gives*. But if God is only One, then this creates a problem. Because in order to be a giver, you need two things: something to give, and someone to give it to. So if God is a giver, and God is One, then God *needs* creation. God *needs* someone to give Godself *to*. So the act of creation becomes an exercise in co-dependence. We all exist so that God could fulfill some need in himself. We become a fix for

God's own quest for self-definition. In a sense, we become objects, only valuable, only loveable insofar as we love God back and accept God's gifts.

But that's not true. That's not who God is. God gives without regard for how we respond to him (which is what we're talking about next week). God isn't some sort of co-dependant deity who looks to creation for a fix. We do not make God who God is.

God is One, but God is also Three. And so within the Godhead we have three persons - all equal - who give to one another and who receive from each other. Within God, within the Trinity, God is fully self-sufficient. God doesn't need creation, God doesn't need us, so God is free to be God. God can *choose* to create out of the abundance of God's love. Out of the overflowing, unending and indescribable joy of self-giving, God is free to create a world to which God can give even more.

Creation becomes God's playground, God's eternal recipient of all good gifts. *Because* God is Trinity. *Because* God is One and Three.

### **You Are Who You Follow**

But... so what? That's interesting, and the nerdier among us are geeking out right now, but some of us are bored nearly to tears. Some of us can't see why someone would go to all the trouble to work through all that. But this is the very core of who God is. This is what makes the God of Christianity so different from every other god. This matters because the Scriptures teach that God created us in his image. We were modeled after God. Designed to imitate God.

You are who you follow. I become like the god I worship. I learn what to value, what matters, what it means to be human from the god I follow. And if I don't worship the God who created me, the God who knows what makes me tick, the God who knows what will really fulfill me, then I will end up diminished. Less than I could be. Less than I'm supposed to be.

What is your picture of God? What do you think God expects from you?

\*\*Interact with texts\*\*

### **Relationships are *the* Priority.**

Let's ask that question of Yahweh, the God that is Trinity. What does the Triune God teach us? God is three and God is one. God is fundamentally, first and foremost a giver. God gives and God receives from Godself. And God gives to creation, and joyfully receives worship from us.

A truly Triune faith is a faith that takes relationships seriously. That prioritizes relationships above everything else.

What gets the most emphasis in your life? Your job? Your position or status? How you look? Your own comforts?

That says a lot about the god you worship - even if that god is yourself.

And how many of us have ever thought that Church was mainly a list of rules we had to keep, a holier-than-thou club? How many of us here have felt the pressure to read our bibles, pray and come to church so that God will love us?

That's not a Trinity faith. Because God is not some distant, co-dependent deity who needs us to be good so he can feel good about himself. God is Three AND One, so God loves us out of God's own abundant inner-life. And a faith that worships *that* God looks different.

A Trinity faith looks to others first. Asks, How can I give to this person? How can I use what I have to make their life/day/week/class/experience better? Not with an expectation of anything in return, but just simply for the joy of giving.

How does a Triune faith redefine your life? How does it change what you do at work? It might mean you focus on your coworkers instead of your tasks. Or it might mean something as radical as passing up a promotion because it would take time away from your family.

What does a Triune faith look like in your home? Can you imagine what would happen in your home if you were first and foremost concerned not with your own comfort, but with that of your spouse, your kid, your sibling or your parent?

We might even dare to ask how a Triune faith redefines how we do Church. We could confess that God isn't first and foremost concerned with how much Bible you read or how often you pray. We could understand that gathering together isn't an obligation. These are instead opportunities to grow, chances to do relationships. To grow closer to God and to each other.

When we do Church in a Trinity kind of way, we actually begin to represent to the world our Triune God. The night Jesus was arrested, the same night he had his Communion meal with his followers, he prayed this prayer over us:

"The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be **one**, as we are **one**, I in them and you in me, **that they may become completely one**, so that the world may know that you have sent me and **have loved them even as you have loved me.**" -- John 17:22-23

Through our faith in Jesus, as we follow him and meet together, he makes us ONE. We become an illustration of the divine mystery of the Trinity to those around us. And God gives himself to US just as he gives himself to Jesus - he loves us the same as he loves the Son.

What the mystery of the Trinity sounds like:

"Why would a bunch of people do all that hard work in the parks every summer?"

"Why would you give up your Saturday to serve food to homeless people?"

"How can you stand to be in the same room as your ex?" (or maybe, "How could you forgive that person and worship with them after what they did you to?")

"Why are you so kind to everyone?"

"What do you mean OSU and Michigan fans/Republicans and Democrats go to the same church?"

**Communion Set-up**

The most important symbol of our Trinity faith is the Communion table. Because here we remember that Jesus called us to be One, and that through his Death and Resurrection we can take part in the mysterious inner life of Yahweh, our Triune God.

*\*\*Prayer of consecration from John 6\*\**

*Call to the Table*