
Today is Trinity Sunday, and our gospel text for today includes probably the most famous verse in all of the Bible, John 3:16.

Trying to preach a sermon that addresses BOTH of these themes would be crazy, . . . so naturally, I'm going try to do it. In 12 minutes, maybe 13. . . !

Tackling the Trinity first (and all too briefly!),
we remember that the doctrine of the Trinity is not spelled out in the Bible. We see Father, Son, and Holy Spirit throughout,

but even the naming of all three together in the customary formula only happens two times in scripture: the Great Commission and Paul's benediction in II Corinthians. The Church eventually hammered out the doctrine of the Trinity over a series of Councils that produced various creeds.

And yet, even as the church hammered out the doctrine of the Trinity, it was a doctrine that nevertheless affirmed the MYSTERY that is the Godhead in Christian theology.

Three in one, one in three. Three distinct persons (*hypostases*) sharing one essence/substance/nature (*homoousion*)

I mentioned the upcoming Trinity Sunday in my devotions on Tuesday at Alley Shoppe. Afterward, a volunteer who knows sign language excitedly shared the sign for trinity with me, and I will share it with you now and you can try it: (*one arm flat, index, thumb, middle finger of your other hand near your body, move under your arm and only hold up your index finger*).

Here is the takeaway today regarding the Trinity: The essence of God is COMMUNAL. God is in relationship with God's self. God IS relational. Three persons so close they are, also, in reality, ONE.

We, being made in God's image, we who are called to the imitation of Christ, are made to be in relationship. No, man, no woman is an island.

Not surprisingly, our lectionary gospel, has all three members of the Trinity present: we see the Father sending the Son, and the Son educating Nicodemus about the Spirit that blows where it will.

Martin Luther called John 3:16 "the heart of the Bible, the Gospel in miniature" . . .

While these 27 words are profound theologically,
John 3:16 has also enjoyed quite an interesting presence in popular culture.

But there are many other places where John 3:16 appears in popular culture. “John 3:16” used to be printed on the bottom of the yellow shopping bags of the clothing store Forever 21. In-n-out Burger prints “John 3:16” on the bottom of some of their cups. Maybe you remember Tim Tebow’s eye black in the national championship game a few years ago, where he had “John” under one eye and “3:16” under the other.

My friend Mike told me about an oil change place called Kwik Kar, which offered the following deal: Kwik Kar’s normal \$42 oil change would be yours for just \$19.99, if you could recite John 3:16.

My earliest memory of John 3:16 in pop culture was watching a football game in the 1980s. You might remember too seeing this, and seeing it since. As one team kicked an extra point, there in the middle of the uprights was a crazy guy in a rainbow wig holding up a sign that simply said “John 3.16.”

The originator of the John 3:16 sign waving, was an eccentric man named Rollen Stewart. Originally, “Rock’n’ Rainbow Man Rollen,” as he was known, would do a crazy dance in his rainbow wig just to get on TV.

But after the Super Bowl in 1980, Rock’n’ Rollen was watching a Television evangelist and committed his life to Jesus. From that point on, he began to wear T-shirts and hold up signs that said “John 3:16.”

Sadly, Stewart became more and more extreme in his desire to convert others, and in 1992,

convinced that Jesus was going to return in 6 days,

he took 3 people hostage at gunpoint in a hotel room in Los Angeles.

Fortunately, the standoff ended without injury to anyone and he was captured.

As he was being put into the police car on his way to serving 3 life sentences for kidnapping, reporters asked him why he did it,

Rock’n Rollen replied: “I had to get the word out for Jesus Christ. . .”

Such was Rainbow Rollen’s influence that, to this day, behind the goal posts, behind home plate, behind the basket, or at almost any gathering of a crowd, someone will inevitably hold up a sign that reads “John 3:16.”

What all these evangelistic uses have in common is a theology that emphasizes personal, individual, conversion, “accepting Jesus as your personal savior.”

Whether or not someone shopped at Forever 21,
lunched at In-and-Out Burger,
or saw a sign behind a goalpost
and became a follower of Jesus, I cannot say.

But. . . I do know that is only one part of the redemptive work that God came to do.
And I say this because of how the texts describe the *object* of God's love.
It doesn't say "for God so loved people," or "for God so loved sinners."
What the text says is that God so loved, is *the world*.

The Greek here is a word you all know, *cosmos*.
"For God so loved the *cosmos*,"
the world, planet earth, everything in it,
and everything outside it, all of it, the entire universe.

For God so loved every

Lion and lamb

Every mountain and molehill

Every plain and prairie

Beavers and the Boundary waters,

Every ocean and ostrich

Brown Bears and White Bear Lake

Every prince and every pauper

Every forest and fish

Every microbe and mushroom

Every bird and every baby

Every tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor

Every person, place, and thing.

Every square inch and all that is in it is so loved by God

that God would give the One and Only Son.

Which of course, means that

God's very self showed up in our broken and selfish world.

Once when my middle son Morgan was a preschooler, he and I were cleaning
the kids' room and getting rid of the excess and broken toys. I would hold up a
toy and ask, "Is this a good toy or bad toy?" Good truck, bad truck, good dart
gun, bad dart gun. I came to a globe.

Half in jest I held it up and said, "Good world or bad world?"

Morgan, whose back was toward me and didn't see that I was inquiring about a globe and not asking a philosophical question, said,
"It's a good world, but it needs help."

Yes it does, young Morgan, yes it does need help.

It needs the kind of help,

The kind of repair and restoration of the world that only God can provide.

Only God could bring us salvation, a salvation from the oppressions of this world,

from disease,

from war,

from famine,

from food insecurity,

from homelessness

From poverty,

from the horror of Gaza,

The brutal injustice in Ukraine,

From the bitter partisan politics in our own country.

And so, the word, GOD, became flesh and lived among us. [Jesus visited our planet.]

And while the zeal of those like Rockin' Rainbow Man Rollen Stewart to save people before it's too late, that theology asserts that those who don't get saved will be condemned to eternal suffering.

BUT . . . notice the very next verse, John 3:17, which says

***"God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world,
but in order that the world might be saved through Him."***

There is no shortage of condemnation in our world today.

Feels like it's worse than ever.

What do we make of a non-condemning God?

Well, Jesus certainly condemned oppression, injustice, and hatred,

But . . . he did not condemn people.

At the very least, maybe we can do the same?

Back to the Trinity. . .

I like the way renowned theologian N.T. Wright describes the Trinity by describing, today, Trinity Sunday. He says that this is the Sunday we

“rub the sleep from our eyes and discover what the word ‘god’ might actually mean.” Having journeyed through the liturgical year and the way it focuses on **Christ**, we now “stand back” and come to terms with both what we know and do not know about God.

“The Trinity,” he writes, “is not something that the clever theologian comes up with as a result of hours spent in the theological laboratory, after which he or she can return to announce that they’ve got God worked out now, the analysis is complete, and here is God neatly laid out on a slab.

The only time they laid God out on a slab,
he rose again three days afterward.

On the contrary: the doctrine of the Trinity is, if you like, a signpost pointing ahead into the dark, saying: ‘Trust me; follow me; *my love will keep you safe.*’”¹

* * *

My love will keep you safe.

Maybe that’s the connection today between Trinity Sunday and one of the most famous verses in scripture:

the Trinity is communal and loving,
and that love spilled out into the world in the person of Jesus,
because God loved God’s creation too much to just let it be, to let it suffer.
God did not condemn the world,
God loved the world to keep it, to keep you, safe.

So go this week knowing that God loves you and the world,
With communal, cosmic, non-condemning love.
[Go and do likewise.]

Thanks be to God, Amen.

¹ *For All God’s Worth: True Worship and the Calling of the Church*