

The Nature of Things

Part 9 – The Nature of God

John 17:20-24

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ November 20, 2016 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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²⁰“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²²The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³I 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. ²⁴Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.” (John 17:20-24, NRSV)

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We’ve just spent the last couple of months thinking together about the nature of things, all sorts of things. We’ve talked about the nature of truth, and scripture, and freedom. Also, the nature of justice, and love, and stuff. Last week we talked about the nature of history. We’ve even talked about the nature of us. Now we have saved the best for last, or at least the most important for last. Today I want us to reflect together on the nature of God.

Without a doubt this is the hardest one. After all, who are we to imagine that we have anything intelligent to say when it comes to discussing the very nature of our Creator? Can the clay pot look at the potter and think it can even begin to conceive of the nature of the one whose hands formed it in the first place? Certainly there is nothing so vast, so infinite, so complex, so other-worldly, so beyond human comprehension then the very nature of God? Still, we must try and see what we can say about it.

Here’s why. A few weeks ago I talked about how right thinking leads to right living. Said another way, what we believe in our minds will inevitably flow out into our lives. This is especially true when it comes to what we believe about God. In fact, a theologian named A.W. Tozer once put it this way, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.” He’s right. If when you picture God you picture an angry judge who is perpetually disappointed with you and itching to let you have it, that will have a powerful impact on the way you live your life. If you picture God as a distant and disconnected being who pays little if any attention to us, much less involves himself in our daily lives, that will also influence the way you live. If you believe God doesn’t even exist in the first place, you will live quite differently than the person who does believe God exists. Again, what comes into our minds when we think about God really is the most important thing about us.

Now, down through history humans have had all sorts of things come into their minds when they have thought about God. We have painted countless pictures of the divine, diverse pictures which often contradict one another. In the ancient world most cultures believed there was a host of gods. Polytheism (i.e. the worship of or belief in more than one deity) was almost universal in the ancient world. Most of us remember studying the Greek Pantheon in school. Zeus, king of the gods. Athena, goddess of wisdom. Apollo, god of light. Ares, god of war. You might remember the story in Acts 17 where the apostle Paul goes to visit Athens and finds the city literally overflowing with images of these gods.

Since most of us are most familiar with the history of the Jewish/Christian tradition, a tradition that has always declared there is only one God, we can wrongly assume that in the ancient world monotheism (i.e. the worship of just one God) was a popular option. It was not. The fact is that Israel was extraordinarily unique in the ancient world, and as we read in the Old Testament the Jews were constantly surrounded by pagan cultures that worshipped all sorts of gods and found it strange, even offensive, that these Israelites would restrict their worship to just one God. Modern Jews, along with modern Christians and Muslims, are still unique in the world today in their belief of just one God. Their picture of the divine stands in stark contrast to other world faiths like Hinduism, for example, which teaches its followers that there are literally thousands, even millions, of gods in existence. If nothing else, it’s a reminder to us that the person

who claims that all religious faiths are really just teaching us the same thing about God is the same person who really doesn't know much about what all religious faiths are actually teaching.

Here is where Christianity presents a picture of God which is not only unusual, but stunningly unique, even alongside other monotheistic faiths. The testimony of the Christian church, rooted in the witness of *both* the Old and the New Testaments, is that there is only one God but that God exists in the three persons of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. For a long time now the church has used the word Trinity to describe this reality, that our one God exists, by nature, in triune community. It's a conviction we, along with Christians from all ages, confess in the Apostle's Creed, that we believe in God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

Now, I'll be the first to admit that there are lots of things in this world that I don't understand. For instance, why is there only one word for "thesaurus"? And, how does the guy who drives the snow-plough get to work in the winter? Why doesn't Tarzan have a beard? If the universe is everything, and scientists say that the universe is expanding, what is it expanding into? If somebody writes a book about failure and it doesn't sell, is it considered a success? Think for too long about these things and your brain begins to hurt.

But those questions seem like kindergarten questions when compared to the question of the mystery of the Trinity. When we do we find ourselves trying to wrap our minds around something that is ultimately impossible for us to grasp. Think for too long about how God can be both one and three *at the same time* and your mental circuits will quickly be overloaded. As theologian Shirley Guthrie once stated, "The Trinity is a mystery to be confessed, not a mathematical problem to be solved." It can't be solved.

This has not kept people from trying. I grew up in the church and I can't tell you how many times I heard some well-meaning person in the church try to explain the Trinity to me by using one well-worn metaphor or another. You know, the Trinity is like H₂O. It's one thing but it can exist in three different forms: water, steam and ice. Or the Trinity is like a man who is just one man but who is also, at the same time, a father, a brother and a son. The problem is that all of these metaphors, as clever sounding as they are, break down quickly, just as do all metaphors for God. It's why the Bible uses so many images to describe God. God is a father, a judge, a shepherd, a king, a warrior, a servant, a rock, and so on. None of these, especially used on their own, can capture the nature of a God who is infinite and eternal, and ultimately beyond being confined by human language. At some point we simply have to confess to believe the ultimately unsolvable mystery that God exists as one God who is revealed to us in the three persons of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

But just because we can't understand the Trinity doesn't mean that there is nothing we can say about it. There is. And this morning I want to focus on one thing that we can say about this mysterious reality of the nature of God, one thing which I believe has tremendous relevance for our daily lives.

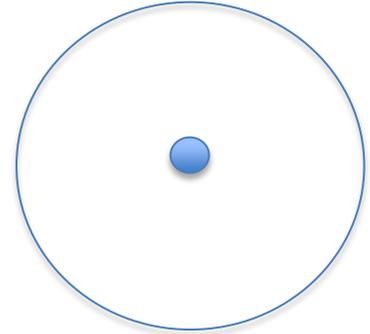
The word 'Trinity' is not a word you'll ever find in the Bible. Not even once. Still, it's a word the church made up to describe a picture of God that we do find all throughout the Bible. And most every time we come across this characterization of God as three in one we see that a primary aspect of God's existence as community is self-giving love. Our one God does not only exist as three persons but exists as three persons who are each completely focused on the other two.

At the mountaintop transfiguration when Peter, James and John got to glimpse, if only for a moment, Jesus revealed in all his divine glory, the Father speaks from heaven to them and says, "**This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!**"¹ The Father is making it clear that he wants the Son to be the focus. At the same time, whenever Jesus speaks about his Father it seems to be the other way around. In John 5:19 Jesus says this, "**Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise.**" Jesus was always deferring to his Father, submitting to his will. And not to be left out, the Spirit follows suit. In John 16:13-14, Jesus describes the Holy Spirit this way, "**When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you.**"

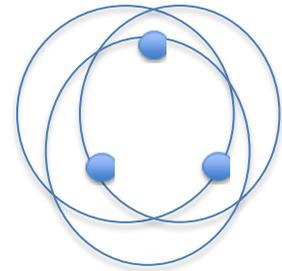
¹ Luke 9:35

Biblical commentators have pointed out that what we see here is the shyness of God, not manifest in each person as timidity but rather manifest as a concentrated attention on the other two. Each person of the Trinity seems to want to avoid the spotlight, is uninterested in self-glory in favor of the glory and adoration of the other two.²

I don't know about you but this is a radically different understanding of the nature of God that I grew up with, and I grew up in the church! The picture I was first given of God was a picture with God at the center of all things. In other words, everything revolved around God. And at first glance, this picture makes sense. If God is the sovereign creator of all that is, of course everything revolves around God and it's understandable that God would demand that it does. However, even as a kid there was something about this picture that didn't sit well with me because ultimately this picture is suggesting that self-centeredness is at the heart of God. That presented a problem because I always knew that self-centeredness was not a quality to be envied in any human, and so why should it be seen as a positive attribute in God, even if it was justified.



This is where the biblical witness of the Trinity, though ultimately still a mystery to us, forces us to think in a radically different way when we consider the nature of God. The biblical picture of one God existing in three persons is the picture of each member of the Trinity not focused each on themselves but each on the others. That means that it is not self-centeredness, but rather other-centeredness which is at the very heart of God. The Father is focused on the Son and the Spirit. The Son is focused on the Father and the Spirit. And the Spirit, equally shy, is focused on the Father and the Son. If this picture of the Trinity is accurate, as I believe that it is, it doesn't fully explain the nature of God but it does teach us that at the heart of God, God is, by nature, other-centered and is therefore characterized by mutually self-giving love. That's what love is, after all, in its purest form. Love is taking the focus off yourself and placing it on another, wanting above all to see the other prosper, and thrive, and flourish, even at your own expense.



What's important for you to see is that this is not just an exercise in theological gymnastics. Again, what comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us because what we believe about God will influence everything about the way we live. Think about it, if the old model is right, if self-centeredness is what we find at the heart of God, that means that creation itself could not have come about as the result of love. In fact, in many other faith traditions, it is power, not love, which motivates the divine to create. That makes sense because before creation existed, before there was anything besides God, if God was just one God how could there be love because love, by definition, at least love in its most pure form, requires another. Sure, you can love yourself, but that is never the greatest love.

Therefore any belief that states there is one God but rejects the confession of the Trinity will have a difficult, if not impossible, time defining God as eternally a God of love. On the other hand, once we begin to understand that God, for all time and even before creation, has existed as one God but in three persons, now we can begin to see how God was a God of love even when there was only God in existence. Furthermore, we can also begin to understand how creation came to be as a product of this love.

Think about love for a minute. Pure love, a complete other-centeredness which exists between two or more persons, always has the quality of expansion. A self-centered person is always withdrawing, protecting, hoarding, putting up walls. A loving person, however, is always opening arms, releasing, giving, tearing down walls. Think, for instance, about the most intimate human relationship there is, the relationship of marriage. When two people love each other in marriage they give themselves to one another fully, all their hearts, all their thoughts, all their possessions, all their lives. On a physical level, the deepest expression of love in marriage is sexual intercourse, an act that is meant by God

² Dale Bruner makes this observation in *The Holy Spirit: Shy Member of the Trinity*, referenced in *Living in Christ's Presence*, by Dallas Willard (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 96.

to be completely other-centered and is best experienced when each partner seeks first not their own pleasure but the pleasure of the other. Even in this aspect of marriage we see how love has the quality of expansion as the deepest physical expression of love between a husband and wife often results (expands, if you will) in new life, in a child.

Think about it, why does a loving couple have children? Do parents have children so that they can have these other people in their lives who will love them and worship them? Is procreation selfishly motivated like that? Or is the motivation power? Do we have kids so that we can have people to rule over, people who can work for us and take care of us? Or are we bored? Is that the reason people have kids? That's the reason I used to think God created humans, because he was all alone in the universe and bored out of his mind? But what couple decides to have children just to spice things up around the house?

Now granted, considering that humans are woefully flawed, people do have kids for all sorts of misguided reasons like these, not to mention the fact that in this broken world lots of couples who deeply love one another aren't even able, for one reason or another, to have children. But don't let those things keep us from considering the possibility that God may have designed human procreation to reflect divine creation. Under ideal circumstances, a child is the physical overflow of love between husband and wife. Their love for each other is so deep that it cannot be contained and expands into new life. So could what happens in human procreation be a shadow of what happened at divine creation, that in the same way, the self-giving, other-centered, eternal love of God, shared in the divine community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, could not help but explode forth into creation. Yes, I believe that the universe came to be as a result of the ever-expanding love of God.

This reality of the nature of God is not only good news but is wonderfully relevant good news for all sorts of reasons. For one, we, as God's beloved creation, are invited by God from the moment of creation into this eternal, other-centered community. We are not invited to become divine, of course. Don't make that mistake which many others have made and continue to make. We are made human and will never be anything more than human. And yet, at the heart of what it means to be human is that we are made in the very image of God.³ We were made to reflect God and one of the ways we are to reflect God is this other-centeredness we find at the heart of God's nature. We were created out of love and to be loved, but we also were created to love, both our Creator and our fellow creatures. As Jesus once said, the two most important commandments of God, in fact the only two commandments of God when it comes down to it, are that we love God with all heart, mind, soul and strength, and that we love everybody we meet at least as much as we love ourselves.⁴

The problem, of course, is that from the beginning of time we have consistently chosen another way. In fact, one way to define sin, which infects us all, is the willful choice to focus our affections inward rather than outward. We focus on ourselves instead of focusing on God, putting our will and desires above God's will and desires. We do the same with other people, thinking first of ourselves especially in relation to people who are not like us and who don't think or act like we do. What you could say is that we have lost the capacity to love and ultimately cut ourselves off from the source of love.

But the good news of the Christian Gospel – listen for it! – is that because God, by nature, is other-centered to the core, God could not leave his beloved in that faraway place. No, the love of God is demonstrated in this, that even though we refused to love God, nevertheless God gave his life for us.⁵ God the Son, in fact, left his eternal divine community in heaven and came to earth to disadvantage himself as one of us in ways that we can never understand, even to the point of death, so that in the end we could be brought back home. Jesus leaves his place so that we might find our place again.

Do you understand what this makes the church? God intends the church to be a united community on earth that reflects this other-centered, mutually-loving nature of God. Listen again to a part of Jesus' prayer in John 17,

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be

³ Genesis 1:27 states, "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."

⁴ See Matthew 22:26-40

⁵ As Romans 5:8 says, "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us."

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.⁶

Think about what Jesus prays for us, that the church would be one, as united in other-centered, mutual love as is God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and that as a result the world would look at the church, and the way we love one another, and come to believe that the God we worship must be real. It's why Jesus once said that the way other people will know that we are his disciples is because, in spite of all the reasons we have for not loving each other, we still do.⁷

Historian Thomas Cahill points out that the church was the very first expression of egalitarianism in human history, egalitarianism being that people, no matter who they are, are of equal value and worth and should be treated as such. It's not that there wasn't a community like this before Jesus, but that there wasn't even the *idea* of a community like this before Jesus!⁸ What is absolutely unique about the Christian declaration of the nature of God is what makes the Christian community on earth also absolutely unique.

Once again, what comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us because the way we think about God cannot help but seep into the way we live our lives. What comes into your mind when you think about God? In some way, has your mind been changed this morning?

I absolutely love what Dallas Willard says about this: "God's aim in human history is the creation of an all-inclusive community of loving persons with God himself as its primary sustainer and most glorious inhabitant." We, the church, are to be that all-inclusive loving community. It's what Jesus prayed for. It's what Jesus died for. And as we keep this vision of God before us, this vision of one God revealed to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, united in this eternal, mysterious dance of other-centered, mutual love, perpetually inviting us to join in the dance, as we keep this vision before us then we, by the power of grace, can be changed to do and be what we were created to do and be, which is to reflect the very nature of who God is.

Let us pray.

Holy God – Father, Son & Holy Spirit – you are one God, the only God, for all time and for all creation. Eternal Father, maker of heaven and earth. You formed us from the dust of the earth, and by your breath you have given us life. We glorify you. Jesus Christ, the resurrection and the life: you tasted death for all humanity, and by rising from the grave you opened the way to eternal life. We praise you. Holy Spirit, author and giver of life: you are the comforter of all who sorrow, our sure confidence and everlasting hope. We worship you.

As Jesus once prayed for us, we also pray for ourselves, and for your church in all places around this world this morning, for all who believe in your word. Lord, may we be one. As you, Lord, are one, as Christ is in you and you are in Christ and the Spirit is in you both, may we also be one. And may this be so that the world we are sent out to serve may see a unity in us that cannot be explained with earthly reasons and therefore may the world come to believe that Jesus is exactly who he said he was.

Your love, Lord God, is eternal. It is the source and mover of all creation. It is what sent your Son into the world to give his life for us. It is what now invites us to share in his life...in your life. It is what changes us to become the people we were always made to be. And it is what draws others to us and ultimately you, that as they see the love we have for one another they may see the source of that love in You.

Lord, may all this be true of this congregation, your people here at Faith. Unite us that we would stand as a witness in this community of your love. May people recognize us as your disciples by the way we love each other. Help us forgive each other, and think first of one another, and seek the best for one another, and be generous with one another, and comfort one another, and encourage one another, and serve one another, and carry one another's burdens so that no person in this church ever has to carry a burden alone.

⁶ John 17:20-23

⁷ John 13:35

⁸ Cited in *Living in Christ's Presence*, 108.

As Jesus prayed these things for us, we also pray them for ourselves. Holy God – Father, Son & Holy Spirit – you are one God, the only God, God for all time and for all creation. We glorify you. We praise you. We worship you.

All this we pray in the name of the one who prays for us, Jesus Christ. Amen.



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read John 17:20-24 again. What stands out to you here from Jesus' prayer.
2. Jesus prays that as the Father and the Son are united, so we, the church, would also be united to God. What can this possibly mean?
3. How do you see the Christian church embodying this unity Jesus prayed for? How do you see us falling short?
4. What is the first thing that comes into your mind when you think about God? What does this say about you?
5. When you think about the reality that God is one God but revealed in three persons, are you able to confess this reality even though you can't understand it? How can we believe something we don't understand?
6. Once you come to believe that God, by nature, is other-centered and mutually loving to the core, how does that change the way you begin to live? Or does it?
7. Consider Dallas Willard's statement: "God's aim in human history is the creation of an all-inclusive community of loving persons with God himself as its primary sustainer and most glorious inhabitant." What is the truest thing he says here?
8. How has your understanding of the nature of God shifted or changed as a result of this message?



Table to Table

Questions for kids and adults to answer together

The Bible tells us that God is one God but also three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. How is this possible?