

## **Trinity: Love and Creation**

**John 17:1-5, 20-26; Genesis 1:1-5;  
Psalm 33:1-9; Romans 5:1-5**

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We are resuming our series on God, in particular, the Triune God. Just to recap, a couple of weeks ago, we looked at few basic things. We saw, first, that the Trinity can only be known by the redemptive revelation that has come in Christ. Second, we saw that this revelation directs us back to the source and end of all things, to God in Himself, God in his inner life, what, borrowing a phrase from Fred Sanders, we called the Happy Land of the Trinity. And finally, we asserted that this, being the case, should produce in us a profound God-centeredness. Today, I want us to contemplate anew, with new eyes, two glorious realities which flow from the being of the Triune Lord. Love and Creation.

### **I. Love**

First, then, love. Last week we spoke of the Trinity as an eternal communion of, among other things, love. I want to unpack this further today. Let's start with the 4<sup>th</sup> c. theologian Athanasius' famous and penetrating remark, that it is more pious to call God Father than it is to call him Creator. Why? because God is essentially, eternally, before and above all worlds, Father. I believe in one God – and the first thing we say is--- the Father. Not Creator or ruler or king, but Father. I believe in one God, the Father.

As an aside, this is a subtle thing, but if one refers almost exclusively to “God,” or to the “Lord” or to the King – and, of course, these are fine designations, Scripture uses them repeatedly. But if we don't think in some kind of primitive, instinctive, basic way, as etched into our spiritual DNA, if we don't think of God as Father, we will tend toward some other metaphor being dominant. For example if “Lord” is the dominant thing we call God, then some notion of command and control, or hierarchical authority and submission, will dominate our conception of God.

We will admit, I'm sure, that the Lord is also Father. But this is not quite right. Fatherhood is not an add-on, or a modifier, of the One who is first King and Lord.

God IS Father. The LORD is Father. He was Father when there was nothing to rule over or govern. When no Lordship over creation was even possible. The One who is Almighty, is the Father Almighty. And thus, the revelation of this Fatherly tenderness and pity, can be obscured, or seen as competing with, his Kingly power, if it is not our first instinct to call him Father (Abba – cry of the Spirit).

God is primarily Father, it's his proper name (at least the name of the first person of the Trinity). Thus, Israel is called his firstborn son. In Deuteronomy, we read that He carries his people, as a father carries his son. He disciplines his people as a man disciplines his son. As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him – Psalm 103 says. And Jesus, of course, repeatedly (exclusively) calls God his Father. This word, Father, already tilts the axis in our minds toward the love, the goodness, and the generosity of God.

So Athanasius was right, and profoundly so. God is eternally Father, and it is more pious to call him this, then to designate him by other names. This means, this existence of the One who is eternally Father means, that there has always been a Son. There is no Father without a Son, and no Son without a Father. Unlike in human relationships, where the Father comes first, and later begets a son, this relation does NOT imply sequence or priority in time. There was never a time when the Father was not Father, and there was never a time when the Son was not Son. (Contra Athanasius' opponents, Arians (there was a time when he was not), and modern JW's who assert the same thing)

So, God is Father, and it is of the nature of fathers to father, to beget, to give life, to give being, to pour out. And so, from eternity, with no beginning, ineffably, asexually, this Father begets a Son. No one has ever seen God, John tells us in the prologue to his gospel, no one has ever seen God, but the only begotten God (Son), who is at the Father's side (in the Father's bosom), he has made him known. Here "begotten" refers, not to human begetting, but to an eternal relationship, of giving by the Father, and receiving by the Son. He is the radiance of the glory of the Father, and thus was, from all eternity, shining forth from the Father's fulness. Or, from John again, he shows us glory as of the only Son from the Father.

All of this dense Trinitarian theology is packed into the Creed in these words: the Son is — begotten of the Father before all worlds, God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God, BEGOTTEN NOT MADE. Begotten of the Father before all worlds.

Always, eternally Father and Son, together. (Most important thing about Jesus?) But there are two more things to point out here. First, this begetting, this giving from the Father to the Son, is not a one time thing. Like, way back in eternity the Father begat the Son, and ever since then, things have been good, if maybe a

little static and flat. This begetting is ongoing. Because it's a relational word, pointing to the reality of infinitely full, life-giving and receiving love, between the Father and the Son. Arguably, the very heart of the NT, is the bond of love between the Father and the Son. At his baptism, to take one example, Jesus is revealed as the beloved Son of the Father (Spirit descending). And, as I hope to show later in this series, participating in the bond of love between the Father and the Son, in the Holy Spirit, is the very goal of salvation.

In John 17:24, for example, Jesus says: Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me, because you loved me before the foundation of the world. We are going to see the glory of God, by sharing in the bond of love, between the Father and the Son.

So, the Father begets in love, and, to state explicitly what we've been assuming till this point, the Son returns love of Father. "I love the Father, and I do exactly what my Father has commanded me," Jesus says.

Now, the Son doesn't beget, but he does receive and respond in filial (having to do with Sonship or children), he responds filial, love, joy, and delight. And he does so in the Spirit. The Spirit IS the love of God, Romans 5 says. The love of God has been poured out into our hearts, by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. Thus, Augustine, for example, sees the Spirit as the bond of love between the Father and the Son. In addition, 2 Corinthians 13, speaks of communion or fellowship as the special work of the Spirit. You have the lover (the Father), the beloved (the Son), and the communion-creating Spirit is the divine love itself, that is shared or breathed forth, between them. So, let's tie some of this together.

From the Christian point of view, to say God is love – then --- IS to say God is Triune. We are not asserting that God is loving, or that God shows love (true as those things are). Rather, what we are claiming is more wonderful than that. We are claiming that God, as Triune, simply IS love. Put differently: no Trinity, no love. Love requires an-other. The Lover needs a beloved to love. Love cannot exist, then, in a solitary, one-personed, deity. Happiness consists of love in society, in a community of persons.

The God of the Deism, or of a general Theism, cannot love in this sense. Monotheism *itself* is insufficient to ground love. At the very least, the God of say, Benjamin Franklin or Thomas Jefferson, the God of American Civil Religion, would need to create in order to love --- he couldn't simply BE love.

But in the Biblical God, the Father loves the Son (other) in the communion, the fellowship bond of the Spirit, and the Son returns that love, in the same Spirit. What this is, then, is an infinite, dynamic, communion of life and light and love. Of sheer delight, of self-giving, of distinct persons so intimate and one, that they can be spoken of as being INSIDE one another. The Triune God is, as John says in

his First Epistle, this love. This vast ocean of blessed, serene, perfect and replete, personal love. It is this love that is revealed in Jesus Christ, as that same John tells us: In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.

Notice the Trinitarian shape of the revelation of God in Christ. John says he wrote his gospel so that we may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing in him we might have life in his name. Jesus is the Christ, that is the One anointed with the fulness of the Spirit, and he is the Son of God – the God who is his Father. The love of the Trinity, not love in general, nor even just the love of Jesus, or merely the love of the Father, but the Trinitarian richness of love – *that* is revealed in Jesus Christ. It is this love, which is poured out into our hearts, from the Father, through the Ascended Son, by the Holy Spirit, so that you might taste and partake of God's own love (not a love detached from this, but the love of the Father for the Son in the Spirit – in that – we are given to share). And the simple and sharp ethical edge of this, John says, is: Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. The love between the Father and the Son, is the source, the fountain, the prototype, for all the love in creation.

There is an anecdote – I don't think it's true, but its humorous --- that Augustine was asked: What was God doing before he created the world? The question assumes he'd be bored, or lonely or twiddling his thumbs, wishing he had a kingdom to rule over. The legend has it that Augustine said something a bit snarky in reply. But of course he and we know the answer. He was enjoying being God, being a communion of love. He was infinitely satisfied, in giving and receiving love, and thus he stood in need of nothing.

## **II. Creation**

This brings us to the second implication of Trinitarian life, namely, creation. We've said it before, but it is only when we see God robustly as Father and Son, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, it is only as Trinitarians, that we truly grasp this: Namely, that God did not, in any fashion, need to create. The creation – of one world or of one million worlds – could not, in any way, add to his glory, his delight, his goodness and love as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is the fulness of love apart from and before all things, all creatures.

A single God, as Michael Reeve's, in his book *Delighting in the Trinity*, jokes, might need to take out an ad that reads: Single God, Non-smoker, Seeks Attractive Creation with a Good Sense of Humor.

But to suggest such neediness of the Triune God would be blasphemous. What this means is that creation is superfluous. Now, often people don't like this.

We are ego-centric creatures, we kind of feel God needs us, or at least is enhanced by us in some way. And we are perpetually correlating God to ourselves. Plus we often, without realizing it, think of the world as a permanent eternal reality – the world just is. Aristotle, for example, thought the world was eternal. And for reasons that are not too bad, unless you're a Trinitarian. His logic went something like this: God is the first cause of everything, and God is good. And it is the nature of goodness to give itself, to spread itself, to be good to another. Thus, the first good cause must have always been causing the good world to be.

Now, he's right about something basic. It is the nature of goodness to give itself out, to diffuse itself. But since Aristotle's god is a unitary being, an impersonal cause, he or she or it, has no OTHER on which to lavish its goodness, and when this happens, creation becomes necessary/eternal. But the Triune God IS love. And the essence of love is willing the good of the other, and so, IN the person of the Son, through the Spirit, the Father diffuses his goodness. Pours out his love. And this fullness of Triune life means the creation is not eternal, it is not even necessary. Yet, yet, this goodness, this Triune love --- freely, not from any necessity or defect, freely – overflows and creates the world.

The creation, then, is first, a Trinitarian act. The Father creates by the Word, through the hovering Spirit, as Genesis 1 informs us. Or, in the words of Psalm 33: By the Word of the Lord the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth, all their host.

We have the Lord, his Word, and his breath (his brooding, bright Spirit). The 2<sup>nd</sup> c bishop, Irenaeus, speaks of the Father doing all that he does through his two hands, the Son and Spirit. His Word and His breath.

And secondly, this creation is an absolute gift. A sign of the profusion of God's love poured out and calling all things into being. It is God opening up the circle of his own love, and giving other things being, by his communicative, spreading goodness. Creation is not necessary, but it is fitting. It is a diffusion of the divine beauty. And seeing the world this way has profound implications. First, it means all is gift, including our own being. And this should do two things to us. It should be the wellspring of gratitude. We are not owed creation and it does not belong to us – it is Triune gift. And secondly, it strips us of the need to control, the will or the lust for domination as Augustine called it.

We are contingent, utterly dependent beings, who did not need to exist, and exist wholly because of this gratuitous, free, love of the Father, Son and Spirit. Thus, we are fundamentally receptive beings. We receive. We don't live from or by ourselves. And we are to receive, then, with open-handed receptivity, and non-grasping joy. The Trinity means all is free gift, all is undeserved bounty. In the words of Michael Reeves: In the Triune God is the love behind all love, the life

behind all life, the music behind all music, the beauty behind all beauty, and the joy behind all joy.

Glory to the Triune God who is love, and whose love has overflowed in the free creation of all things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small. Amen.

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