

JULY 4, 2021

# Marion weekly update

## FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



SERMON from June 27: 'Holy, Holy, Holy' Revelation 4:8-11, Matthew 28:16-20

Our hymn this week is another beloved hymn of the church, Holy, Holy, Holy. For some of you this brings back some good memories. When we sang with the adult day care once a month there was a gentleman named Tony there. Each and every time you knew you were going to sing Holy, Holy, Holy because Tony would request it immediately. He loved it and belted it out as best he could.

The hymn itself was written by Reginald Heber. Not unlike several others we've looked at, this was written in the late 1700s/early 1800s in England. Reginald was a bright man who attended Oxford University before going on to prepare for and become ordained in the Anglican Church. As a pastor he was known to have a very strong and inspiring Christian character. For sixteen years he pastored in a small town in the western part of England. Around age 40 Reginald was appointed to be the bishop of Calcutta, India. Not only was he responsible for this territory, but also for all of Australia as well. Only 3 years into his term, as he was preaching to a group of tribespeople on the evils of the caste system, he was hit with a bout of sun stroke and quickly passed away. Heber died at the young age of 43.

In addition to hymns, Heber was quite the writer. Many of his works weren't published until after his untimely death. This hymn doesn't have as much of the colorful back story as some of the others, but it's nonetheless significant. Heber was very much inspired and humbled by the triune nature of God. This hymn was written specifically to be sung on Trinity Sunday, which occurs several weeks after Easter. The words clearly praise the Trinity, and reflect almost word for word in some instances the passage in Revelation we read today.

Not terribly unlike All Hail The Power of Jesus' Name, Holy, Holy, Holy is simply a song of absolute praise and adoration for God. In this instance, it gives us the opportunity to explore the Trinity.

Trinity is never mentioned in scripture itself. Still, there is the clear sense that God acts in three distinct purposes with three distinct titles. The Father of the Old Testament, the Son of the gospels, and the Holy Spirit of the early church and the epistles are evident. In fact in our Matthew scripture, they are named specifically in the Great Commission. The Trinity doctrine is our human way to wrap our heads around what all of this means and how these persons exist and relate to one another. The truth of the matter is that it is a mystery. No one has it fully figured out. Our Tuesday night Bible Study knows this well. Every time the Trinity is brought up, everyone gets this little twinkle in the eye because they know what will happen if we jump down that rabbit hole. Once we start trying to unpack it we may as well forget whatever else we had to study because the mystery of it and difference of opinion about it easily takes up the time.

No analogy we come up with fully represents this mystery. One of the most common I've heard is an egg. It is three in one. Shell, white, and yolk yet still one egg. This quickly falls down. What do we do with the shell? We discard it. Are the yolk and white viewed as equally healthy? No. Nothing in the Trinity can be discarded, and we understand the persons as completely co-equal. Not to mention comparing God to something that comes out of a chicken seems a bit "off".

This is how we understand the Trinity. All persons co-eternal and co-equal. They exist together and act in unison at all times. They are inseparable, almighty, and unconditionally loving.

Theologians have debated this since the days of the early church and will likely do so until the end of time. This is the nature of debate when the finite tries to comprehend the infinite, when the temporal considers the eternal, when the limited creation tries to understand the unlimited creator of the cosmos. The debate has spurred many ideas counter to the more traditional view, and some considered outright heresies.

Arianism was an idea brought out by Arias. He suggested that the Son came OUT of the Father. This led to a question of "substance" and that he suggested that because one came from the other they were not of the same "substance." That one came from the other meant they were not co-eternal. That one came from the other suggested a hierarchy meaning they

were not co-equal. Councils were gathered and Arias was labelled a heretic and his idea a heresy. This helped cement the official position of the church on the matter.

It didn't mean that Arianism went away completely. He and his followers continued to think this way, but that the church had ruled meant that his ideas would fade. Yet in human terms, there is logic to their notion. When we use terms like "Father" and "Son", we use parental language. At what point has a child ever come before the parent?

Modalism is another position largely frowned upon by the church. The Trinity is traditionally understood to be three distinct persons. Modalism suggests that there is in truth only one being manifesting and different forms. The Father being one manifestation in His transcendence, the Son being one in His incarnation, and the Spirit being another in its presence within and around us. Three modes, one being.

Christians today who believe this will often use the three labels of these manifestations interchangeably. If it is the same being, to name that being three times is both unnecessary and redundant. While some baptize in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, others simply baptize in the name of Jesus. One acknowledgement is sufficient.

Our idea of the Trinity itself is heresy to the other Abrahamic religions... We claim to be monotheistic, as do Islam and Judaism. To them, we are polytheistic. Clearly to them we can't do math. How is 1 equal to 3? On a math test, if asked if 1 equals 3 and we answer "yes", no doubt it will be marked incorrect. Yet we hold fast to this understanding despite its mystery.

The traditional understanding of the Trinity is three distinct persons yet so in harmony, agreement, and concert with one another that they act as one in all things and at all times. The fancy word for this relationship is perichoresis.

Despite its mystery, the Trinity is incredibly helpful to us in doing our best to understand God in all God's fullness. The greater and more completely we understand God, the clearer we become on how to relate to, please, and serve God. This only serves to deepen of faith, improve our witness, and fulfill our lives. In order to grasp this more clearly, I suggest that we look not only at the labels in the Trinity, but the roles of the persons of the Trinity.

Labels and roles are different. Knowing a role is much more illuminating. If I'm walking down the street and someone says "who is that?", the answer "Brent" isn't very helpful. "Brent" is a label, but it says nothing about who I am or what to expect if someone meets me. "That's Brent, he's a pastor and karate instructor" is much more clear. By defining my roles, now someone has some sense of who I am and what my purpose is given those roles. There's more understanding. Unfortunately this cuts both ways. Knowing a role also carries assumption. For example I never introduce myself as a pastor, nor do I every wear a clerical collar. Because of assumptions, if I lead with that I usually don't get to meet the "real" person. People sanitize their expression and experience for fear of offending the preacher. There is still a sense that if someone curses in my presence my ears will catch fire or tells a story that's a bit dicey my head will explode. Neither will happen.

I like to meet people for who they are. Sometimes leading with my role gets in the way of that. On the comical side once someone has let themselves be themselves and then find out I'm a pastor their expression is hilarious and priceless. Comforting when they aren't judged, yet tragic in other ways, is when they respond "you don't act like a preacher." I'm okay with that.

There are also assumptions about the roles of God. Here we'll look at them briefly but I hope helpfully. They correspond to: Father/Creator, Son/Redeemer, Spirit/Sustainer.

The Father is the person that is transcendent, almighty, creating, on the throne, and judge. This is often what is referred to as the "God of wrath". We are humbled before the Father. We are also keenly aware that to follow God is to embrace that there is expectation. There is right and wrong. There is accountability for the right and wrong that we do. This is the person that shows God's sovereignty and place above all things.

The Son is the person that is redeeming, reconciling, love, mercy, forgiveness, and compassion. The Son is incarnate and understands fully the plight of humanity because He walked in the flesh on the earth. He is the living example revealed in the gospels that we have to follow. In the Son, the God of judgement is balanced by the God of mercy and desire to be united with creation. Yes, there is right and wrong, however there is also forgiveness to be had and salvation accomplished on the cross. The God of judgement, and awesome might is at the same time the God of unconditional love and mercy.

The Spirit is the person that sustains us day by day. The Spirit is that experience of God in the heart that calls us, guides us, empowers and equips us, strengthens us, comforts us, and unites us every moment with God. The Spirit helps us find our purpose. This person of the Trinity adds the dimension of continual presence, and that while there is expectation and mercy, we are not on our own to figure out what the expectation is nor where to find mercy. The Spirit is our internal compass and conscience, and the one who helps us find our way to the Son.

All three equal in importance, eternal together, acting in unison. If we look at the witness of the scripture we see it from the beginning. The Father creates, the Spirit moves across the face of the deep, The Redeemer forgives Adam and Eve and equips them for life outside the garden. There is judgment yet longsuffering and guidance as prophets were moved by the Spirit. In the New Testament Jesus prays to the Father, is the Son, and offers the Spirit. John places the Son at

the beginning when he shares that “in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. All things were created by Him and through Him, and without Him nothing came into being.”

Grasping these roles gives us a much greater understanding of the nature, character, and expectations of God. Keeping them in equal standing is also incredibly important. If we are called to emulate God in our lives, and we overplay one role, not only do we not reflect the genuineness of God, we put our witness and potentially relationship with God on varying degrees of shaky ground.

Here are some thoughts of what can happen when we propel each person of the Trinity above the others:

**The Father:** Given the nature of the Father as we've seen Him, to put this person ahead of the others is to focus on that “wrathful” nature. We see scripture in more judgmental and often harsh light. If I begin to emulate this person of the Godhead exclusively, I too can become harsh and judgmental. Anger and bad behavior out of that anger I may gloss over with “spiritual” wording. “I wasn't angry, I was righteously indignant.” There are all kinds of ways to spin things to make myself sound spiritual when in truth I'm giving in to my darker impulses. Without the balance of Redeemer and Spirit, this can become a very aggressive, narrow minded and hearted way of not just seeing others, but also treating others.

**The Son:** Given that the Son is all about mercy and forgiveness, this trap lends itself to a “free for all” mentality. “I'm forgiven so I can do whatever I like.” There is the danger of falling into the idea that the scripture “nothing can pluck you from the savior's hand” indicates that once a simple prayer has been said, there is no expectation. Naturally this is entirely unbiblical, however as we are entertaining, Biblical encompasses the fullness and equality of all three persons. This elevates one role above the others in a very tunnel-visioned manner. Dietrich Bonhoeffer termed this “cheap grace.” A very selfish view of salvation that in truth destroys a genuine witness for Christ rather than uplifting it. The world is left to wonder in this what the purpose of faith is should we be no different after coming to the Son than beforehand.

**The Spirit:** The Spirit is so often tied to our experience and feeling a presence, guidance, comfort, etc. The danger here is that being all “Spirit” can cause a twofold shift in focus. First, is equating faith with emotional experience. This leads to contriving feeling and playing on that, and fails or comes to question when the feeling is gone. Second, the Spirit empowers. The temptation here is also to become focused on the miracles, speaking in tongues, etc. The issue is that we can forget the purpose for the “feeling” and for the miracles, which John refers to as “signs”. None of it is an end unto itself. The reason they are “signs” is that the intention is to call attention to Jesus for the purpose of following Him and His message.

To put it in other terms, think of a car. Cars today have seats that heat and cool our bottoms, computer screens on the dash, can play music and movies, sun roofs, convertible tops, and a million other bells and whistles. They are nice, but what if the engine doesn't work properly? The entire purpose of the car is done with. This is the danger in focusing on the wrong aspects of faith. If the core of faith, the message of faith, the engine of faith is compromised, the rest don't really matter. To drive this home, this is one aspect that Jesus Himself addresses. “You come to me saying ‘we've cast out demons, healed, done all manner of miracle in your name’, and I will respond ‘away with you, I never knew you’”. The flash isn't what Jesus is looking for. It's the genuine, authentic heart of faith that reflects His love and grace. As Paul said, “if I haven't love, I have nothing.”

This is a sobering reminder that having our understanding, experience, and witness of God out of balance can have terrible consequences in both this world and the next. What I want to finish with is why reflecting on the roles of the Trinity and keeping them in perspective is so wonderful and necessary. It's not merely the dangers of having things out of balance. It's the give of what happens when we have them clearly in their place.

The term is wholeness.

When we see God for all that God is, that full view, or at least as full as we can get, gives us a much more whole understanding of God. In that wholeness we see the persons of God working in unison, and the combination inspires us to humility before the almighty, authoritative, creating Father, gratitude to the saving, loving, merciful son, and hope and purpose through the guiding, comforting, and empowering Spirit. We see God more completely, and the balance prevents us from giving in to one person over the other, and also prevents us from potentially being misguided or even put off by the extreme of only entertaining one person of the Godhead.

When we live in to the fullness of the triune God through our relationship with God, we experience a wholeness of life that doesn't occur apart from it. We are more balanced. We are more fulfilled. We are more authentically faithful. We bear more genuine and inspiring witness.

Often we talk about feeling unfulfilled as if there is a “hole” somewhere in our lives. This may be because that “hole” is due to our relationship and experience of God not being “whole”. Something is out of perspective and balance. Returning to wholeness may happen when we take time to reflect on who we are, what we are doing, and compare it to the fullness of God revealed in the Trinity. Our mysterious, likely incomplete, understanding of the Trinity is immensely useful as a map and model to know God more and know ourselves better as we transform along the journey we are on.

This reflection and experience of the Trinity connects us while we are on earth more deeply to what and who is in heaven. This reflection and transformation empowers and emboldens us to also bring heaven to earth.