

## **Homily – A Four-Way Love**

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This past Thursday night we began a new series of Confirmation or Inquirers classes. In that class we talked about theology or the study of God, and as Christians we can't talk about theology with grappling with the Trinity. The Trinity is our human attempt to put the concept and being of God into human thought and words. However, as with any attempt to define God, we always fall short. Our concepts put limits on the being of God when in reality there are no limits on the being of God. Our names for the Trinity also put limits on the being of God, but we use them anyway.

Now, we traditionally have called the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Many traditionalists go no further than this. God is only called the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

However, I think it can be interesting to look at other names for the Trinity.

My two favorite alternatives help me have a deeper understanding of the nature of God.

The first alternative name is Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. This takes some of the gender and anthropomorphic stuff out of the name of the Trinity and helps me have a somewhat better understanding of the Trinity.

You can see how these names line up with the traditional names.

Father is Creator. Son is Redeemer. And, Holy Spirit is Sanctifier.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier.

There is yet another name for the Trinity and this is the one I want to focus on this morning.

The third way to name the Trinity is Lover, Beloved and Loving – that is the verb loving.

Father is Lover, Son is Beloved, and Holy Spirit is Loving, the connection between the Lover and Beloved.

To me this way of naming the Trinity gets at the heart of my understanding of God.

And, it also lines up with the New Testament passage on love that we heard read a few minutes ago. This is a reading that is often used at weddings for it seems to be a wise way for two people to approach a life-long committed relationship. Keep love at the center. Love is the theme of much of what Jesus taught and is also what we hear from Jesus in his Great Commandment.

Jesus says “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

It is this linking of God and love that have become a central part of my personal theology and my beliefs about the Trinity.

So this morning, I want to flush this out, and, to do that here is a Christian framework of love that is helpful to me, and I hope it is for you as well.

First, God loves. That is the first part of the message. God loves.

Second, we respond to God’s love in one of those three-legged stools. As Episcopalians, we like to explain things in threes and this construct is a three-legged stool of love. We are to love God, we are to love others and we are to love ourselves.

We have all heard people say that you can't really love God if you do not also love your neighbor. I think this is true. I think our ability to love other people directly impacts our ability to love God. Loving God and loving others are related.

But, there aren't just two legs. We also need to love ourselves.

I don't think you can effectively love God or love others if you don't also love yourself.

A lot of people dismiss the idea of loving self because they think it ignores God's love for us. They think the self-esteem movement has gone too far such that self-esteem means over reliance on self and elimination of God.

There are times that this has happened, but this does not mean we throw the baby out with the bath water. Self-esteem is still important.

We need to allow ourselves to be the beloved of God. God loves us so we should also love ourselves.

Much of the ineffectiveness we have in loving God and loving others is because we don't also love ourselves.

Fifteen hundred years ago, Augustine wrote about love. And, he assumed that all people love themselves. As a gay man, my experience has been quite different. When you are taught that being gay is sub-human, it is hard to love yourself.

For years the message from society and even from the church has been damaging to so many.

Women are worth less than men. Damaging to self.

LGBT are worth less than straight folks. Damaging to self.

One race is worth less than another. Damaging to self.

Poor folks are worth less than rich folks.

Introverts are worth less than extraverts.

Only beautiful, funny, articulate, normal people are worth anything.

Over and over we have messages that are damaging to self.

As Christians and as a Church, we need to encourage people to respond to God love in three ways, not just one or two.

Now, we all know of churches that emphasize only one of these responses to the love of God.

Sometimes, a church focuses only on loving God.

Sometimes, a church ignores love of God and only focusing on loving others.

As Christians and as a Church we need to focus on all three.

We need to practice responding to God's love in all three ways. We need to love God back, we need to love others because God loves them and we need to love ourselves because we are the beloved of God.

Now, I am going to go a step further and suggest that there might be a fourth leg of love.

Adding a fourth leg is stepping away from the three parts of the Trinity. I wish I could keep the symmetry between the three that is Trinity and the three responses to God love.

However, a lot of personal reflections says that there is actually a fourth response to God's love that fits within the general framework of the Bible and my own life experience.

I wonder if we need to have a fourth leg of love that includes our love for the rest of non-human creation. We can be so human-centered, and I wonder about our love for the rest of creation.

In the Book of Genesis, we read, "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day."

In Psalm 24 "The earth is the LORD'S and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it."

And from the Gospel of John "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

God loves all of creation. Shouldn't we respond in kind? Shouldn't we also love what God loves? Shouldn't we also love non-human creation?

I wonder if we can love God, love others, and love ourselves if we do not also love the rest of creation.

I came across this quote from the theologian, Jürgen Moltmann in his book, *The Spirit of Life*.

"Today becoming connected to God means defending God's creation against human aggression, exploitation and destruction. This has a personal dimension: what am I doing about my consumerism and refuse? Am I part of the throw-away society or am I resisting it in creation's name? It has a social dimension too: how can Christians, in joint discussion and shared worship, arrive at a reverent life-style? And there is also a political dimension: what laws for protecting the environment and other creatures do we speak out for?"

My mind is filled with thoughts of what that means. It actually makes me tired thinking about it because it has huge ramifications for the way we live our lives.

But, if I can't love God effectively, do I have a choice? Like I said it makes me tired thinking about what to do.

But, something happened two thousand years ago. Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we are reconnected back to God. We are connected back to God such that we can pray for God's assistance through the Holy Spirit.

And, I want to suggest to you today that there are at least three things you should pray for.

First, give thanks to God that you are the beloved. Bask in God's love as the beloved and say thank you. Our hearts can be joyful for we are the beloved of God.

The second prayer for you today is to have the Holy Spirit help you process this fourth leg of love. Look to God to help discern whether love of God, love of others, and love of self should be complemented by love of the rest of creation. Pray to God about it. And, ask for the comfort and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

I would also ask you to pray for a third thing. If God tells you that there is a fourth leg of love, then ask God to give you an opportunity to practice and share that love of the rest of creation.

Now, I know that it can seem so daunting to try to figure out how to get started. Sometimes it seems like one person cannot make a difference. There is nothing wrong with asking God to give you a baby step. But, just ask God to show you what to do next and to give you the strength, wisdom and courage to do it.

Our God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit can also be thought of as Lover, Beloved and Loving. As we link God and love, we are called to respond to God's love in four ways, love God back, love others, love ourselves and love the rest of non-human creation.

And, in this way our hearts can be full of thanks to God and we can be joyful. Alleluia. Alleluia.