

Good morning everyone and Happy Thanksgiving! A special welcome to those of you who are with us this morning, visiting friends and family; it's a pleasure to have you with us today.

I'm going to abbreviate my message this morning in order to allow time for a reflection on the practice of thanksgiving. If you'd like to, you can participate by sending me your texts throughout my sermon. Send me a few thoughts on who God is, what He has done, or what He has given that you are thankful for—you can send your text to the number on the screen.

Last week I spoke about the concept of relational wholeness—I said that great relationships don't just happen—they are *made* not *born*. Great relationships have defining characteristics that can be named and measured. And I suggested that there is one Relationship that is greater, better, higher, more perfect, and beautiful than any other—I was speaking about the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We looked to John's Gospel, and to the four repeating characteristics that mark the inner life of the Trinity: (a) *full equality*; (b) *glad submission*; (c) *joyful intimacy*; and (d) *mutual deference*.<sup>1</sup> If we are searching to find a picture of relational wholeness, we need look no further than the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—this Relationship is the fundamental reality in the universe and the paradigm for every human relationship.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Shaw, *Doing Theology With Huck and Jim*, 62.

<sup>2</sup> Darrell Johnson, *Experiencing The Trinity*, 41.

Now, there is no possible way that we could ever replicate their relationship—our every attempt falls short. The good news is that we don't have to replicate this life, instead, we have been invited into the Trinity circle to participate in their life.

This morning I want to continue to talk about finding relational wholeness by participating in the relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but first, I want to offer some foundational theological teaching on the Trinity.

Did you know that you could search the Bible from cover to cover and never find the word "Trinity?" It's true, and yet, the concept of the Trinity is found all throughout the Bible's pages. When we use the words "*Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*," or the phrase "*One God, in three Persons*," we are using trinitarian vocabulary to make sense of what God has revealed about Himself.

In order to preserve the trinitarian revelation of God, there are three basic truths that need to be affirmed and held in tension. The first truth is that **there is only One God**. Deuteronomy 6:4 says, "*Hear O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one.*" The second truth is that **God exists eternally in three Persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit)**. The third truth is that **all three Persons share equally in divinity and attributes**.<sup>2</sup>

As long as we hold on to each of these three truths, we affirm and preserve the mystery of God's self-revelation. But if we let go of just

one of these truths, we slide into heresy. Let me invite you to take a look at the screen behind me—if the blue circle represents orthodoxy, we hold onto the truth as long as we hold on to each side of the triangle.

If we affirm that God is both One and yet Three but deny that the three Persons are equal in divinity and attributes, we fall into *Subordinationism*. This heresy teaches that both the Son and the Spirit are not eternal or don't fully share in divinity like the Father. More often than not, *subordinationism* teaches that the Son is a lesser god, the first among the Father's creation. Jehovah Witnesses and Mormons fall into this error.

Let's move on to the second heresy. If we affirm that God is One, and that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are equally divine, but deny that they exist eternally in three Persons, you fall into *Modalism*. Allow me to use an analogy. At any given time, I may speak of myself as being a father, a son, or a grandson; or alternatively, I might speak of being a pastor, husband, and father. But no matter the labels, I remain one person not three. *Modalism* suggests that while God has revealed Himself at different times and places as Father, Son, or Holy Spirit, these are simply three modes of expression, three labels if you like.

The third heresy takes place if we affirm that God exists in three Persons, and that each Person is equal in divinity and attributes, but deny that God is One—if we let go of God's essential Oneness, we fall into *Tri-Theism* (three God's).

Many Christians aren't sure what to think about the Trinity, or whether it really matters. Roderick Leupp suggests that many view the Trinity as “a riddle wrapped up inside a puzzle and buried in an enigma.”<sup>3</sup> Seamands further describes the sentiment, “It's a **riddle**—how can something be one and three?—a **puzzle** since it seems irrational, and an **enigma** because even if you understood it, what practical value does it have?”<sup>4</sup>

We regularly baptize people into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we proclaim the Trinity in our creeds and benedictions, but how does the Oneness and Threeness of God gives shape to our lives?

As we've been saying these past two weeks, contained within God's own being—Father, Son, and Spirit—we find the divine pattern for all relationship.

God is both One and yet Three. Existing as God does in this trinitarian circle (Father, Son, and Spirit), engaged as God is in this dance of perfect relationship, God is simultaneously both Lover, the Beloved, and Love itself. 1 John 4:8 says that God is love—there cannot be love apart there is someone “other”—love has always existed because God has always been Father, Son, and Spirit.

There has never been any “need” in God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit has always been complete and content. And yet, out of the overflow of their love, God created the world. We were created in

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<sup>3</sup> Roderick Leupp, *Knowing The Name Of God*, 16.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Seamands, *Ministry In The Image Of God*, 10.

God's image, creatures made for relationship. Stephen Seamands writes, "The trinitarian circle of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is...an open, not a closed circle. Through faith in [Jesus], through baptism *into* the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we enter into the life of the Trinity and are graciously included as partners."<sup>5</sup>

This morning I want to talk about relational wholeness in terms of entering into the love of God for God, the love of God for others, and the love of God for the world.

### 1. Entering into God's love for God.

At Jesus' baptism, we are given a window into the love between the God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. When Jesus came up out of the water, we are told that the heavens parted, the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus, and the Father said, "*This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.*"<sup>6</sup>

The Son loves the Father, teaching us to pray for the Father's name to be hallowed, for His Leadership to be embraced, and His plans to be accomplished. And the Holy Spirit loves the Son; He doesn't draw attention to Himself, but seeks to draw people to the Father, through the Son. God is simultaneously both Lover, the Beloved, and Love itself, and we are invited to enter into this dance of love.

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<sup>5</sup> Seamands, 12.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 3:17.

<sup>7</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons On The Song Of Songs*, 277.

In Matthew 22:37, Jesus told a crowd of would-be-followers that the most important commandment in all of Scripture was to love God with all of one's heart, soul, and mind. 1 John 4:19 says, "*We love Him because He first loved us.*" In all of life, there is nothing more important than being loved by God and loving Him in return.

According to Jesus, having nice cars, clothes, and money doesn't compare. According to Jesus, being successful, or receiving the adoration of thousands doesn't compare. According to Jesus, having good health and a long life also falls short—nothing is more important in life than being loved by God and loving Him in return.

Augustine once wrote, "You stir [humanity] to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."<sup>7</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux once wrote, "Love is a great thing; as long as it returns to its beginnings, goes back to its origin, turns again to its source"<sup>8</sup>.

We were not made to stand on the sidelines of God's love. There is big difference between being a witness to love and entering into love, just as there is a big difference between attending a wedding, and getting married. We are not invited to observe the love between the Father, Son, and Spirit, we are invited to enter in and participate.

Some of us are standing on the sidelines, because we have been unwilling to admit our need for God’s love. We may be aware of our broken relationships with friends, siblings, our spouse, or children—we may even be asking God to bring wholeness to these relationships. The question is, *are we ignoring the brokenness that exists between us and God?*

It’s time to connect the dots. Wholeness comes in relationship with God, it comes when we enter into and embrace the perfect love that exists between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Transformation comes from participation in this relationship—we can only pass on to others what we experience firsthand from God.

Many of us are standing on the sidelines of love because of the hurts we have suffered. Over the last few weeks, a number of you have shared with me about the family environment you grew up in. Some of you grew up in very broken family systems, environments where emotional expression was denied, discouraged, and even ridiculed. Some of you that feel disconnected from God are experiencing the result of unhealthy patterns that were forged in the fires of your family upbringing.

But no matter the measure of your brokenness, your life is not beyond God’s reach. All of us need God to reach out and rescue us. Our heart might be in ruins but God can restore it. Our capacity for love might be small, but God can enlarge it.

Because of what Jesus has done for us—dying on the cross, bearing our sin, winning forgiveness for us—we have been invited to

participate in the love that exists between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.<sup>9</sup> God loved you before you were conceived; He has loved you every moment of your life. This morning He waits for you to turn to Him, to receive His forgiveness, to participate in His love.

Relational wholeness becomes possible by entering into God’s love, but it also includes entering into God’s love for others.

## **2. Entering into God’s love for others.**

Love for others is a natural by product of entering into the circle of trinitarian love. Every person I look at is a person that God sees, knows, and loves. Every person who sees me, is seeing a person who is seen, known, and loved by God.

When Jesus was asked about the single most important commandment in the Scripture, He offered a two part answer: “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.*”

So what does it mean to love others in the same way that we love ourselves? How do we love ourselves? For starters, we tend to look after our body’s needs—food, clothes, and shelter. We seek to protect our rights, freedoms, and reputation. We seek opportunities to grow and develop. We give priority to our own preferences, hopes, and dreams. When we’ve behaved poorly, we tend to give ourselves the benefit of the doubt. These are but a few of the ways that we

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<sup>9</sup> c.f. John 17:22-23, 26.

demonstrate love for self; each in turn becomes a way to demonstrate love for others.

Loving others as much as we love ourselves is a tall task—we get it wrong at least as often as we get it right. But then, caught up as we are in relationship with the Trinity, we not invited to love others the way God loves them, but to participate in the love God has for others. Jesus doesn't ask us to conjure up warm fuzzy emotions for our enemies, but He does ask us to love them—to enter into His forgiving, gracious, love for them.

We enter into God's love for another every time we recognize that they have been made in God's image, that they are worthy of respect, that God is for them, not against them, that God has plans to prosper them—to give them a hope and a future. We love others when we agree with God's assessment of them and align our thoughts, words, and deeds with His.

Relational wholeness begins by entering into God's love, but it includes entering into God's love for others, and entering into God's love for the world.

### **3. Entering into God's love for the world.**

Robert Unger once wrote, “the closer you get to the heart of God, the closer you get to what's on God's heart.”<sup>10</sup> And what is on the heart of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, if not the world? John 3:16 says, “*For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.*”

In Mark 10:45 Jesus spoke of Himself saying, “*the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.*” In John 16, Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit who will function like an Advocate; He will draw attention to Jesus, seeking to draw the world back into relationship with the Father, through the Son.

The world is constantly on God's heart—your friends, your neighbours, your family, your classmates, workmates, and teammates. God has the nations on His heart—Chinese, Filipino, and Thai; Jewish, Palestinian, and Iraqi; African, Kiwi, and Aussi—God loves the world! We are invited to enter into God's love for the world every day—by loving to the people around us, by praying for the nations, by sending missionaries all over the world, and by engaging the mission in our own backyard.

If we are going to find wholeness, we're never going to find it in ourselves; we need to find our wholeness in God. When we look to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we find the wholeness we seek for all of our relationships. May their common life give shape to our own, and may their love be ours in abundance.

### **Pray (salvation prayer)**

### **Thanksgiving Focus**

Last year, my wife's extended family joined us on a trip to Thailand. Thailand is a beautiful country to visit, but our primary purpose for going was to give our daughter an opportunity to reconnect with the

<sup>10</sup> Robert Boyd Munger, *My Heart, Christ's Home*.

country she was born in, and, to spend a few days with her birth mother. It was a trip filled with unforgettable moments—some joyful and others heart-breaking.

But as we made our way through Thailand, day after day, I began to notice a phrase that was frequently found on my wife’s lips: “*Mark, isn’t the Lord so kind?*” When our airplane landed safely, when we found someone who could speak English, when we didn’t get sick, when the taxi took us to the right location, “*isn’t the Lord so kind to us?*”

After a time I asked Naomi why she kept using the phrase. She told me that a few weeks before we left for Thailand, she started praying that God would give her eyes to see the daily evidences of His kindness in and around her life. Naomi wanted to cultivate a thankful heart.

Every October, our government sets aside a national holiday simply entitled “Thanksgiving”. It’s not a particularly Christian holiday, and yet “thanksgiving” is at the heart of Christianity. Psalm 136:1 says, “*Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His love endures forever.*” Lamentations 3:22-23 says, “*Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.*”

As I began my message, I asked you to text the number on the screen with a characteristic of God, something God has done, or a gift God has given that you are thankful for—here are some of your responses (**read texts**).

One of the ways we practice thanksgiving is through the simple act of remembrance—we remember who God is, we remember what He has done, we remember what He has given. Remembering is a powerful, spiritual act, that fuels our thanksgiving and our faith—it’s because of God’s past faithfulness that we can be faith-filled as we look to our future.

What are you thankful to God for? We’re going to take the next minute or two in silence to remember God’s faithfulness and offer up our thanksgiving to Him. **Pray**

### **The Lord’s Supper**

Philippians 2:5-8 says, “*In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!*”

When we look to the cross, we remember the cost of our forgiveness—the Son of God died in our place, for our sake. When we look to the cross, we remember the value God has placed upon our lives—we are loved! Jesus willingly laid down His life for us. When we look to the cross, we remember that the Trinity circle is now open to receive us—through the forgiveness Jesus bought, we have been invited to participate in the love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

*“The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body, which is*

*for you; do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.'*<sup>11</sup>

Today we remember the sacrifice Jesus made on our behalf, we remember that we are forgiven and free, we remember that we are loved by God. As we partake in this holy meal, let us do so with joyful thanksgiving.

At this time I'd like to ask that those who are serving communion please come forward—we have three stations up front, and one/two in the balcony. When you come forward to receive the bread and the cup, please tear off a piece of bread, dip it in the cup, and then eat with thanksgiving.

## **Worship**

**Benediction:** “Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

<sup>12</sup> 2 Corinthians 13:11, 14.