

## *Trinitarian Monotheism*

Rev. Joe Connolly

“Everything that *Abba*, God has belongs to me. That is why I say the Spirit will take what is mine and reveal it to you.” — John 16:15.

When I was in Seminary I asked a mentor if having a sermon title was required. “No. But it’s a good idea,” was the response. That mentor offered two rules about titles.

First, a title should be broad enough to allow multiple interpretations of it. Second, a title will help you focus on what you might want to say. To use a highfalutin term, it’s a thesis statement.

Now you can see in the bulletin my title today is *Trinitarian Monotheism*. My task is to try to explain what that means. But here’s my caveat about the title, itself. Speaking of Trinitarian, today’s sermon has three parts, each with its own subtitle. Part I *Systematic Theology*— *Systematic Theology*— now that’s boring! Hence, part II is *Yeah, but What Does that Have to Do with My Feelings?* The title for part III is *Covenant*.

In addressing these topics, but especially when it comes to systematic theology, I hope to explain the main tension within Christian thinking. What is that main tension? Christianity is an Eastern religion crammed into Western philosophy.

Eastern thinking strives assess the whole and is not too concerned with the individual parts. Western thinking examines each individual part in an effort to assess the whole. Obviously neither gives a complete picture. So, part I: *Systematic Theology*— and even that very word ‘systematic’ reflects Western thinking. (Slight pause.)

A couple of weeks ago I saw someone walking downtown with a “T” shirt which said, “Follow Jesus,” a common kind of statement in our society. But that statement is a proclamation of a very secular theology from my position.

Yes, it’s good to follow Jesus. I recommend it. But does that say or mean God the Creator and God the Holy Spirit are not worth following? In short, is that a denial of the reality of the God of Trinity and a denial of *Abba* God, God to Whom Jesus prayed? (Slight pause.)

In systematic Christian thought the label we use for God is Trinity. But that is meant to do only one thing: describe God, explain the nomenclature of God. Nomenclature: that’s a \$64 word which means describing, naming things.

Monotheism— God as One— describes God as proclaimed, as named, by Islam and Judaism. But the classic Christian formula proclaims, names God as three Persons yet One. Or, as I said, *Trinitarian Monotheism*.

Now, earlier we recited the *Nicene Creed*. In case you did not notice, the Creed has holes in it you can drive a truck through. Why do I say that? It is impossible to describe God. The very idea of God is

beyond description. And the people who wrote the Creed knew that.

After all, can you tell me what these words really mean, really? (Quote:) “Light from Light, / true God from true God, / begotten, not made,…” I can’t tell you what they mean. And the people who wrote the Creed also could not.

But they did have source material for their language. The source material is the Bible. For instance, this was in the reading from Genesis we heard last week. *Yahweh*, God says (quote:) “Come, let us go down and baffle their language…”

Let *us* go down— plural. God, as described there, is not singular. And using the plural for naming God happens more than once in the Hebrew Scriptures. What were the writers of the Hebrew Scriptures saying?

Well the explanation found in the *Nicene Creed* says three Persons, one God. And in its own strange way it *is* systemized theology since it *is* a description of God.

However that *is* the problem with systematic theology. It simply describes God. It’s a little like saying Joe Connolly sports a beard and is about five foot seven or eight. That might describe me. It says nothing about who I am. (Slight pause.)

Well, systematic theology was boring, was it not? But this obviously leads us to *Yeah, but What Does that Have to Do with My Feelings?* So, what does that have to do with feelings?

Nothing and everything—you see, it’s the three Persons thing. God, by definition, can be and is relational to God’s own self— singular yet three— three persons relating. That very statement says something personal *and* emotional about God.

I would be as bold as to suggest if each one of us does not have a sense of self, if a person does not at least in part know something about self, if an individual does not relate to self, that needs to be worked on. Why? It is knowledge of self, relationship with self, which empowers us to be in relationship with others.

So what does that relationship stuff come down to, really? How many hundreds of times have you heard me say this: love God, love neighbor. And loving God and neighbor is about relationships— a relationship with God and a relationship with others.

This loving God and neighbor stuff I constantly stress is not meant to be mere lip service. It is about emotion and it is about commitment. Further, knowing one’s own self, relating to one’s own self is not easy; loving God and neighbor is not easy. The depth of this love is supposed to tax every fiber of our being, our whole soul. (Long pause.)

That brings me to part III— *Covenant*. This is personal, so let me get a little closer to you. [The pastor moves from the pulpit and into the center isle.] In this case, for today at least, covenant is about me and about you and about 23 years. The covenant was and is about the *time* we shared and about *how*

we shared and about *how much* we shared for these 23 years.

So, let me say something about the theology of covenant. Covenant embraces two commitments— a commitment to forgiveness, sometimes called unconditional love— and a commitment to growth, sometimes called learning.

I need to say one more thing concerning the theology of covenant. Secular society talks about justice a lot. We in the church also speak a lot about justice. But there is a difference.

Very few in secular society address justice and mercy. We in the church who practice covenant as it relates to God, know there is no justice without mercy, the mercy God offers to each of us.

As to our covenant, I said this a couple weeks ago. There is no such thing as an individual who is successful on their own. That is an American myth— myth in this case meaning falsehood. Any individual needs the support of many people, in this case I mean this community.

This church, this community of faith, had and has amazing, incredible, talented people. And I was supported by amazing, incredible, talented people in this community of faith. If I have had some success, it is not because of me; it is because of the people of this community of faith. (Slight pause.)

This afternoon there shall be an Order for Times of Passage, a Farewell Service. In the course of that service I will be called on to recite these words and I shall recite these words: “I thank the United Church of Christ, First Congregational of Norwich, its members and friends for the love, kindness, and support shown me these last 23 years. I ask forgiveness for the mistakes I have made. I am grateful for the ways my leadership has been accepted. As I leave, I carry with me all that I have learned here.” (Slight pause.)

And so, we have been in covenant. In one sense covenant— this unconditional love, this commitment to growth— never ends. Our proximity will, in fact, end. But our covenant shall never end if we continue to love unconditionally, if we continue to grow, continue to understand justice and mercy are intertwined. (Slight pause.)

If I have done anything over the last 23 years I have done my best to offer my love. Just like with any true covenant commitment I did not always succeed. But just like with any true covenant commitment I constantly tried to do better, tried to grow.

And I hope in my own small way what I have just said describes love— covenant love. So what else is there to say at this time of parting except amen.

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ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “I first preached in *that* pulpit on June 2, 1996. At the end of the service I did then what I have done ever since. I said something. What I

said on that occasion is Congregationalists have a great tradition called freedom of the pulpit. That freedom stems from the fact that a pastor needs to understand *that* pulpit is the pulpit of the people, your pulpit. All I or any pastor should try to do is share something about their own journey and how that might relate to the Gospel. And sharing the Gospel in the fulness of its love is not something I or anyone else can do in one Sunday, not something I or anyone else can do in a month of Sundays. Sharing the Gospel cannot be done quickly. Now, that is what I said back then, 23 years ago. Guess what? After 23 years of Sundays I have not yet completely shared the fulness of love found the Gospel. The fulness of love found in the Gospel is so great it cannot be shared in snippets from the pulpit. And that is what really makes *that* pulpit your pulpit. It is you who share the fulness of the love found in the Gospel every day. And over the course of 23 years I am aware you have tried to do that every day not just on Sundays. And, therefore, I thank you all for your love and your prayers and your care and your support.”

**BENEDICTION:** Go now, go in safety— for you cannot go where God is not. Go now, go in love— for love alone endures. Go now, go in peace— for it is a gift of God to those whose hearts and minds are in Christ Jesus. Go now, go with purpose— for the Spirit of God empowers us for today and all the eternities called tomorrow. And may we love God so much that we love nothing else too much. May we be so in awe of God that we are in awe of no one else and nothing else. Amen.