



Transcript: The Power of Community

Series: *Spiritual But Not Religious*

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People come to church for a lot of different reasons. I don't know for all of you specifically what brought you here this morning, but maybe you had a really difficult, busy week, and you're just looking for a bit of a place to relax, to have a little respite from the chaos. Maybe you're here because you have a lot of questions and you're seeking some answers. Maybe you've come because you have trouble in your heart, in your spirit, and you're looking to find some peace. Maybe you've come here today to be able to have connections with other people, to be able to get in touch with friends of yours or maybe meet some brand new people as well. Maybe you came here this morning because you're seeking to be able to touch, even for a moment, the divine in our midst.

People come to church for a lot of different reasons. But it's also true that people do *not* come to church for a lot of reasons, as well. That's why we're taking these six weeks in this series – *Spiritual But Not Religious* – where we're looking at some of the reasons why people who are looking for meaning in their life, don't believe that the church is the place to find it. Spiritual but not religious.

In the second week of the series, Jason talked about some of the roadblocks, and he specifically named things like the world believing that the Christian church is judgmental or that we're close-minded. He also said that the world sees us often as hypocritical, as not acting in a way that is consistent with what we say we believe.

We very much want Aldersgate to be a place where people know that they can come in and be loved. We want this to be a place where people are real and authentic, where we can share our lives in meaningful ways. But the reality is that the world does not see that that as happening in the church.

When I preached the first weekend of this series, I gave you one of my favorite scripture passages, Colossians 1:15: "*For the Son is the visible image of the invisible God.*" Then I went on to talk about how if Jesus is the image, the visible image of the invisible God, we are the body of Christ. That means that we are then to be the reflection of the visible image of the invisible God. That is both incredibly full of joy and also a little bit overwhelming, isn't it?

So... if we are to be the reflection of the visible image of the invisible God, and God is a Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, what does that look like for us?

Does anyone here feel like they have a really good, 100% solid understanding of the Trinity? No? No one? The Trinity is a very confusing thing for us. In a lot of ways that's very understandable, because for most of us there's only one person residing inside our heads. We change in many different ways throughout our lives, so you could say that we're "different



people” as we grow and age. But we’re only one “person” at a time. There are different ways that we interact with the world – for example, this past week alone I operated as a doctoral student at Wesley Seminary, as a wife when I came back to my home, as a daughter on the telephone with my parents, as a friend having lunch with some buddies, as a pastor preparing to preach this sermon and worship with you this weekend. But I’m one person, not five. You’ve worn multiple hats this week also: parent, child, spouse, worker, volunteer. But you are one person. So, how can we possibly understand a God who is one and yet who is also three?

Well, this is not a brand new question. People have been struggling to find ways to understand the Trinity from the early days of the church. In his article “The Trinity,” Kallistos Ware, a bishop in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, outlines several metaphors that have been used.

One person said that you have a torch that then lights two additional torches and that that is like the Trinity, because the light from the original torch is not diminished. It doesn’t become lessened. It is shared and it becomes brighter and more powerful.¹ That’s a beautiful image of the Trinity, but it falls apart when you realize that those are three individual torches that which can then be carried away and never interact with each other again. For although the light of the first torch is not diminished by kindling the other two torches, there still are three separate entities: three distinct sources of light.

Another metaphor for the Trinity using light is a rainbow, which contains lots of different colors but that is one continuous entity.² But that metaphor, too, falls apart when you realize that, yes, the rainbow is one, it is the spectrum of refracted light, but it’s always static, it’s always in the same place, so the red never touches the green, it never moves closer to or relates directly to the yellow. That metaphor doesn’t talk about the three distinct persons of the Trinity.

In another attempt to describe the Trinity, Augustine of Hippo used the metaphor of sound: “the Father is ‘silence eloquent,’ Christ is the Word or mouth and the Spirit is the voice that utters the word, the breath (*pneuma*) or sound that makes the word audible.”³ This is a descriptive device that resonates with me — I enjoy the idea of the Spirit breathing the Father’s Word into our spirits. But this metaphor also is limited. The relationship of the Trinity is more than a one-way passage of a word (Son) from an originator (Father) via a conduit (Spirit).

Another ancient church father, Gregory of Nazianzus looked to the human mind for an illustration of the Trinity: “the three faculties of intellect (*nous*), reason or word (*logos*), and breath or spirit (*pneuma*).”⁴ This is certainly interesting, as we were created in the image of God, and so our pattern is to be a reflection of the Trinity. As Gregory of Nyssa (a good friend of Gregory of Nazianzus, by the way) claimed, “the human being is a mystery that images divine

¹ Kallistos Ware, “The Trinity: Heart of Our Life” in *Reclaiming the Great Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1997), 130.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 131.

⁴ Ibid., 132.



incomprehensibility.”⁵ But while we are made in the image of God, that image is not perfect, for God is far more than what our “faculties of intellect” can encompass.

Carl Jung looked at the Trinity in terms of psychology: “the Father symbolizes the deep Self, the Son symbolizes the Ego or conscious and revealed Self, while the Spirit symbolized the Ego-Self axis.”⁶ Got it now? No? I’m guessing from the looks on your faces that you didn’t find that one very helpful. So let’s try this one from Dorothy Sayers. She used the metaphor of human creativity: “the father corresponds to the creative idea initially present in an author’s mind; the Son represents the creative energy or activity of the author, the book that he actually writes, his idea in material and communicable form; and the Spirit signifies creative power that flows back to the author from his own activity – his own idea, revealed to him in a way that causes him to respond and rejoice.”⁷ This recursive, self-affirming pattern is interesting, but also limited, especially as it does not explain or explore the distinctive nature of each of the persons of the Trinity.

So, while these metaphors or analogies are all helpful in assisting our limited minds to imagine the Trinity, they don’t complete the task. It may well be that there is no perfect metaphor to be found in our human experience that can fully describe both the simplicity and the complexity of our trinitarian, three-in-one God.

But, that said... I think Catherine LaCugna, a Catholic theologian who died in 1997, hits the nail on the head when she wrote this: “The central theme of all Trinitarian theology is relationship: God’s relationship with us, and our relationships with one another. The doctrine of the Trinity is not an abstract conceptual paradox about God’s inner life, or a mathematical puzzle of the ‘one and three.’ The doctrine of the Trinity is in fact the most practical of all doctrines.”⁸

It is the most practical of all doctrines because relationships define who the church *is*. Our relationships are to mirror the relationships of the Trinity. Together we are called to be the “Body of Christ.” Romans 12:5 tells us: *“So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.”* Modeled on the relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we seek to be mutually respectful, loving, and interdependent. Again, to quote LaCugna: “The communion of God and Christ, according to the doctrine of the Trinity, does not permit any kind of subordination, inequality or hierarchy. While every person is unique, no one person is more important than another, no person comes before another. Likewise with the human community. Communion in the Spirit of God means that all persons, while irreducibly unique, exist together as equal partners in Christ.”⁹

⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, from Nonna Verna Harrison, “Human Community as an Image of the Holy Trinity,” in St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly, vol. 46, no. 4, 2002, page 348.

⁶ Ware, “The Trinity,” 132.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, “The Practical Trinity” in *The Christian Century*, July 15-22, 1992, 679.

⁹ Ibid., 682.



I've only been with you for about eleven months now, but in this time of getting to know you, hearing the history of this church, I know that this is something for which Aldersgate has been striving from its inception: to value all members of the community and to celebrate the gifts and graces and talents each person brings to this church family. Inviting all people to come, cherishing each other, being able to understand that they are all, although different, equally valued. That is a beautiful way for a community of faith to live.

I have for many years now really loved reading about Celtic Christianity, and it's not just because on humid days my hair looks like Merida from Brave. (I knew I would get a laugh out of you!) I love the religious art of Celtic Christianity, I love its optimism, and its easy acceptance of the divine relationship embodied in the Trinity. In a 2003 article, Kerry Dearborn, a professor of theology at Seattle Pacific University, briefly outlined three priorities of Celtic church life: "(1) to be a community of believers who were drawn into the loving communion of the Triune God; (2) to experience and embody that kind of communion in their own relationships in the church; (3) to participate with God in extending the invitation of such union with God and with others to the world."¹⁰

Developing a deeper relationship with God, with each other, and with the world. That sounds familiar, doesn't it? Hopefully it does, as that is what your pastors are trying to communicate in worship each week! Just as the three persons of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, "indwell one another through a movement of reciprocal love,"¹¹ so we are to reflect that same kind of unconditional, grace-filled love with the members of the "Body of Christ," and to bring that trinitarian, self-giving love out into the world.

A clergy friend grew up in the Russian Orthodox Church. He is now a United Methodist pastor in Florida, but on his office wall he has a gorgeously ornate Russian icon. We started talking about this piece of art one afternoon, and he told me how icons are used in that tradition to focus one's thoughts and prayers, as if the icon was something that could be "moved through" in order to reach God. The icon *itself* was not the goal, but simply the conduit. Its loveliness was intended to be a representation of the infinitely more lovely reality to which it pointed.

I thought that was a beautiful way of looking at that particular piece of art, but I also realized that we are called to be icons in this world. To quote LaCugna one last time today, "The Church's life is to mirror God's life, to be an icon of God's life. The Church, in other words, should exist as the mystery of persons who dwell together in equality, reciprocity and mutual love."¹²

That is so wonderfully reflected in the passage that we read today from the 12th chapter of Romans, especially verses 3 through 5: "*For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among*

¹⁰ Kerry L. Dearborn, "Recovering a Trinitarian & Sacramental Ecclesiology" in *Evangelical Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 48.

¹¹ Ware, "The Trinity," 138.

¹² LaCugna, "The Practical Trinity," 682.



you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another."

To be an icon of something means to have your words and your actions accurately, perfectly, wonderfully reflect the core characteristics of what you are an icon of. We are to be an icon of God. How do we even start to do that?

I think the answer in part can be found in the verse following what we read today. This is the beginning of Romans 12:9: "*Let love be genuine.*" The word that we translate from the Greek as "genuine" is *anupokritos*: the anti-hypocrite.

Hypokrites in the Greek doesn't mean just what we think of hypocritical behavior nowadays. It meant to act, as if to put a mask on to stand in front of people to say words that really don't have any meaning to who you are at your core, to do all the right movements, to say all the right things but to not have it be who you really are.

Now, I can tell you that it is very easy to come in the doors of a church, the doors of this church, and to be a hypocrite. You can walk through those doors and you can look really good on the outside. You can have put on your best clothing (or at least taken a shower). You can walk through those doors, and even if you had a horrible fight with your spouse or your kids are driving you nuts, if you had an absolutely horrific week at work, you walk through these doors, you put on a smile and someone asks you how you're doing and how do you answer? "Great." Or "Fine." As if everything is wonderful.

We want this to be a place where it is safe to be real, to be authentic, to be who you are at your core and to not have to worry about being judged. That is what we want Aldersgate to be, anti-hypocrite: *anupokritos*. That is who I believe you are. That is who I believe you want to be.

The single best way I know of how to be able to grow that in your life is to be involved in a small group. I would encourage you to find a way to be involved in a group with a few other people who can get to know who you really are, to be able to celebrate your joys, but also be able to hold you up when things are difficult.

When I had just started at my last church down in Florida I was almost immediately assigned a small group. I didn't know these people. They didn't know me and they didn't know each other either. We were doing a church-wide study that the Senior Pastor had written, called *Rethinking Church*. We came in together and for three months everything was "perfect." Nobody in that group, absolutely amazingly, nobody had any problems. Everything was perfect. They were all just so incredibly sweet. Then... after about three months one of the women in the group had a crisis in her life, and she was honest and opened up about it.



Well, that opened up the floodgates for people to start talking about the real things that were going on in their lives, the joys, yes, but also the really challenging pieces. This group for each other became *anupokritos*. They became anti-hypocrite. They became open and authentic and real. They became the church in that moment.

When I left that congregation to come here to Virginia, I was curious to see what would happen with them. I rejoice to know that they have continued on with that absolutely beautiful relationship. I got to hear what happened as one of their members who had cancer, what they did for her. They would take turns, going and sitting with her while she was having her chemotherapy. They were there in the hospital when she was ill. They supported her family, took care of her husband Len. She passed away at the beginning of this month, and they were there for her until the very last moment, and they continue to support Len in his grief. *Anupokritos*. They were there for each other.

We want that for each of you, and if there is any way that we can help you to get there, please don't ever hesitate to ask us. We want to be able to do that for you, because we know that when you experience that kind of Christian community, you're able to deepen your understanding that you are a child of God, absolutely and eternally beloved. And when you have that kind of certainty in your life, you can walk out into the world and you can be the *anupokritos* for the world, being real and authentic and showing God's love through your every word and every action.

I pray that that would be so for you this day and always. I offer this to you in communion with our Trinitarian God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.