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John 17:20-26: *A Father's Love: A Teaching on the Trinity*

Preached at Trinity CRC Evening Service

May 27, 2018 – Trinity Sunday

²⁰ “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— ²³ I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

²⁴ “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

²⁵ “Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. ²⁶ I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.”

The Word of the Lord. (**Thanks be to God**)

This evening we are talking about the Trinity...

The great *mystery* of the Trinity.

Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest, uses the metaphor of “circling around” this mystery...

He says, “Remember, mystery isn’t something that you *cannot* understand—it is something that you can *endlessly* understand!

There always seems to be more as we plumb the depths of God’s revelation to us.

So that’s what we’re doing tonight...

Circling around the Trinity...

Trying to understand more of this mystery of 1 God - 3 Persons.

And tonight from our vantage point as we circle the Trinity we’re looking at the love of the Father...

The love of the Father for the Son and the love of the Father for us.

Because we're human, and our language and experience is limited...

We have to speak about God and his character using illustrations and images:

God is like this...

Or, God is like that...

We are never able to fully capture, or completely define God...

But we see what he is like in our experiences.

Watch this 3-minute video that attempts to capture a father's love.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_zff7UQ--w

You can see the passion on this father's face:

The anger and the hurt he expresses towards his son's decisions...

Because he wants what's best for his flesh and blood.

The pain the father feels standing outside of the hospital room...

Weeping knowing that his son is hurting because he can no longer walk.

Then the determination on the father's face as he carries his son home...

Laboring step by step...

Walking with his son on his back...

Motivated by love to be there for his son.

And finally the joy and amazement as the son takes steps of his own.

In this video we see the love of a father for his son...

And we can say "yes," the love of God the Father towards his Son is *like* this...

But our language and our illustration fall short...

Because the love of this father (in the video) is not perfect;

It never will be, and it never can be.

Sin distorts our ability to give love unconditionally.

Or if we use another illustration:

The love of God the Father towards his Son is *like* the love Pastor Rich has shown to his daughter, Rachel.

Leaving as soon as he could...

Dropping everything at a minutes notice...

Flying 30+ hours to be by Rachel's bedside.

And now in these last few months Pastor Rich has:

Dailey prayed over her;

Fed her;

Sung hymns to Rachel;

Sat with her for hours on end...for months...

Talking her through her confusion...

Laughing, crying, worrying, and rejoicing over her.

The love of a father for his daughter.

And yet even *this* cannot capture the fullness of God the Father's love for his Son.

Knowing Pastor Rich, and the astute Reformed theologian he is...

I bet he would agree that *his* love for Rachel is imperfect.

As much as he wants it to be a perfect, unconditional love...

He too is human and so he too suffers the impact of sin on his ability to love.

No image or illustration is able to fully capture the love that God the Father has for his Son...

Our language is too limited...

Our experiences are tainted with sin...

And God's love is too big for us to fully grasp.

In our passage this evening we are met with words that communicate to us, the love of God the Father for God the Son.

Jesus says, "...you loved me before the creation of the world." (17:24)

"Before the world was set on its foundations, you loved me."

Now how is this possible...

For the Father to love Jesus before the creation of the world?

And what does this love look like?

Here is where the doctrine of the Trinity comes into play.

In our confession tonight we used the words of the Athanasian Creed.

We said, "nothing in this trinity is before or after..."

“In their entirety the three persons are coeternal and coequal with each other.”

What this means is that one did not come before the other.

The Father did not come before the Son...

The Father and the Son did not come before the Spirit.

They have existed together from eternity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And this is able to happen because all three persons are God.

The Father is God.

The Son is God.

The Spirit is God.

And yet they are not three gods, but one God.

So before all time the Father, Son, and Spirit existed together.

Now, what can we say of their love for each other?

We know that God is love...

Love does not define God, but God defines love.

The Father is love.

The Son is love.

The Spirit is love.

That's a whole lot of love going around.

The love that *we* know—

incomplete and imperfect as it is—

comes from God because God is love as we're told in 1 John 4.

So before anything was created...

Before the universe was formed...

Before stars spotted the sky...

Animals roamed the earth...

And humans began to populate...

Before all of this...

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit existed together.

I cannot think of a strong enough analogy to capture the love between them so I'll throw out a few.

My brother was in the Army back in the States...

He was an Army Ranger and served several tours over in Iraq.

I hear that in combat situations you become particularly close with your comrades.

You eat together; train together; and face death together.

There's an unspeakable bond that develops between soldiers in war.

I've hung out with my brother and some of the guys he went to war with...

And you can just tell that there's something between them.

They've been through stuff together.

They know each other.

They get it.

Even now, removed from war, back home, they still have each other's backs.

It's an intimate bond of a unique love they share.

Maybe you've experienced a piece of something like this...

In a job with your co-workers...

It's common for members of a team to develop these close ties...

Or maybe a few of you came over from Holland together...

There's a bond between you that runs deep...

It's hard to put into words.

The Father, Son, and Spirit existed together before time...

The source of all love—one God, three persons.

The love that exists between them is unfathomable.

Stronger than a husband's love for his wife...

Or a mother's love for her child.

But we see pieces of this love in the New Testament.

After the incarnation, where God the Son becomes a human like us...

He is baptized in the Jordan river.

And a voice comes from heaven saying,

“You are my Son, whom I love” (Mark 1:11)

This is not a casual love...

Or a love based on conditions.

This is a love that has existed from eternity.

The source of love, loving the source of love.

The love of God the Father for God the Son.

This is an eternal love...

An intense love.

And it's reciprocated by the Son, back to the Father.

In John 14:31 God the Son says, “the world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me.”

We see in this the back and forth love between the Father and the Son...

A love that existed before time, but that's revealed to us in Scripture.

And we say “so what?”

What of the Trinity?

Why does it matter that the three persons of God love one another?

Immanuel Kant, a key player in the Enlightenment, had these thoughts a few hundred years ago.

He said,

“The doctrine of the Trinity, taken literally, has no practical relevance at all, even if we think we understand it; and it is even more clearly irrelevant if we realize that it transcends all our concepts. Whether we are to worship three or ten persons in the Deity makes no difference.”

Does the Trinity really not matter?

A few of you must have thought it was important because you named a church after it!

But we don't hear much about the Trinity.

Maybe we take it for granted.

Maybe we, like Kant, don't think that it's relevant.

We can't see God so why does it matter?

Or maybe we think it's an outdated doctrine.

But remember we're circling around the Trinity—

Circling around the Godhead, this great mystery—

Because we think it has something to say to us.

Let's look at verse 26:

“I have made your name known to them, and will make it known, so that *the love with which you loved me may be in them...*”

“The love with which you loved me may be in them.”

This may be the most breath-taking verse in the whole Bible.

The love that God the Father reserves for God the Son...

Is given to us.

That indescribable love that the Father, Son, and Spirit have for each other—

Existing before all time—

This extravagant love is now directed toward us.

We're caught up in this intense love.

So yes, the Trinity is relevant for us today...

It's especially relevant for those who do not feel or know God's love.

This verse says “Yes, God *does* love you!”

“The Father loves you with the same love that he has for the Son.”

There is no substitute for this kind of love.

No love on earth compares to the love the Father has for you and for me.

This is an intense love that sacrificed everything.

The love that this Father has for his children is a perfect love—

It's pointed to in our relationships...

And we glimpse it in stories like the video clip we saw—

But nowhere do we see this love of the Triune God displayed like we see it at the cross.

Where God the Son submitted to the will of God the Father...

Where God the Father willingly gave up his Son...

He essentially turned his back on this love that existed from eternity.

The source of love turned his back on the source of love...

And it was all out of God's love for you and for me.

A Father's love for his children.

The Triune God's love for us.

And this love is made known to us in the Bible...

This book is the story of God's love for his wayward people.

Like in our passage this evening we're told that the Father's love for us is the same love that he has for his Son...

We read the words on the page with our eyes and it enters into our minds.

And it would stay "up here" were it not for that third person of the Trinity...

The Holy Spirit.

In Romans 5 we're told:

"God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit."

Not only does God the Father make it possible for him to love us through God the Son...

He makes it possible for us to *know* his love by the Holy Spirit.

God pours out his love into our hearts through the Spirit.

One God, Three Persons...

One essence, yet distinct persons;

All divine, coequal with each other;

Coeternal;

One in power, goodness, truth, and mercy (Belgic Conf. Art 8).

One in love for us.

May the love of God, Father Son and Holy Spirit be poured into your hearts this evening.

Amen.