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 Matthew 28:18-20; Galatians 4:4-7
 June 27, 2021

A Journey into the Country of Grace Week 5: Trinity 201 – God on the Street

Quick highlight reel of the last 4 weeks:

Exploring the country of Grace.... Our purpose is to meet God himself afresh.

1. We began our journey with a pair of complementary questions, one for you to ask yourself and one for you to ask God:

- What do you desire for your relationship with God this summer?
- What does God most desire for your relationship with him this summer?

2. Way points in the country of Grace

- In the country of grace, only little children can enter
- In the country of grace, the gift is the Giver

3. God is personal (self-revealing), not generic G-O-D: we are made for lives *with* God, not slavishly working for God or passively gathering information about God

4. Is God first Ruler or Father? Trinity Deficit Disorder (erasing the face of God) – we run from God because we are believing some kind of lie about God.

What do you think about when you think about God?

- *“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.... We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God.”* (Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, 9)
- *“Compared with our actual thoughts about Him, our creedal statements are of little consequence.”* (Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, 10)

I shared last week that in the past, my default story of the most basic thing about God was that he is an Almighty Sovereign Lord and Ruler of all. There are many problems with this starting point, but perhaps most fundamentally, is that it defines God by us – by his creation. How can God be lord and ruler and almighty if he does not have a creation over which to rule and lord and exercise his mightiness? So to think of God in that way, primarily as Ruler, is to think from a center in ourselves. When we think about God from a center in ourselves, we end up not with God, but mythology.

In the 4th century, the church father Athanasias posed a different kind of question – a question that did not have us as its starting point, but God himself. His question was this: “What was God doing before creation?” In response to his question, he argued “Before God was creator, he was Father.”

In other words, “Father” is not God’s nickname. God did not become a Father. He has never been without the Son or the Spirit. He has always loved the Son. There is a fellowship at the heart of God.

So the question for today – and for every day – is simple: what do you think God is like?

One of the most basic and important skills we need to learn in order to live as followers of Jesus is what we might call “thinking from a center in God rather than from a center in ourselves.” In fact, the whole of the Christian life could be summed up in that one activity: “the disciplined habit of thinking and acting in Christ” (Torrance, Atonement, 376).

If we are to think about God from a center in God, we need to let this reality guide our thinking in all respects.

Starting points matter.

Scripture reading:

Ephesians 1:3–14 (NRSV)

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, 4 just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. 5 He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, 6 to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. 7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace 8 that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight 9 he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, 10 as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

11 In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, 12 so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. 13 In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; 14 this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory.

1 Corinthians 8:4–7 (NRSV)

4 [Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols,] we know that “no idol in the world really exists,” and that “there is no God but one.” 5 Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords— 6 yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

7 It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge.

Prayer

Introduction:

July 4.

245 years ago our nation declared its independence from the oppression of the British and we became the masters of our own destiny.

This is a day to celebrate and reflect upon the founding of our country and what it means for us to be the United States of America. We have much to be grateful for.

Like all historical events, the story of the birth of our nation can be told in many different ways, and from many different perspectives. Some tellings are naively positivistic, while others are unfairly negative. I suspect the truth is somewhere in the middle.

How we choose to tell the story of our nation is important. Stories tell us the lay of the land. They give us perspective about our present and suggest a trajectory for our future. They tell us what matters and what doesn't, what is possible and what isn't, who is with us and who is not.

While the birth of a nation matters greatly, I would suggest (and I assume you would agree since you are worshipping God on this day) that the birth of our world and us as human beings is a far more significant story.

For the birth story of our universe tells us who God is and what it means to be human, and the answer to this pair of questions should take precedence over the claims any single nation, including the United States of America, might make upon its citizens.

The passage we read from Paul's letter to the Ephesians speaks of these beginnings in a spirit of praise and wonder: before the foundation of the world, God the Father chose us in Christ to be holy and blameless before him in love - destined for adoption as his children.

This is our origin story....

We did not begin by a Declaration of Independence, but by an undeserved and gracious gift of dependence. The Source of our beginning does not lie in us....

Blue Hole picture:

- Last week, camping down at Paradise, Makenzie River
- Blue Hole hike (100 degrees outside, 40 degrees in the water)
- What makes the Blue Hole unique is not just how clear and cold and deep it is, but the fact that it is self-existent. It has no perceivable external source.
- And yet a constant stream of clear and (very) refreshing water flows out of it.
- God is self-existent. He is not dependent upon creation for his existence. He is his own source, but he gives rise to all other things.

Why is there something rather than nothing?

Have you ever considered that?

Nothing had to be.

Why did God decide to have a creation?

What would it look like if we tried to answer this question from a center in God?

Today we are going to try an experiment in this mode of thought with a little help from the 15th century Russian iconographer, Andrei Rublev.

Andrei Rublev (1360-1430; painted *The Holy Trinity* in 1410)

It hangs in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow.

It is considered by many scholars the most perfect of all Russian icons and perhaps the most perfect of all the icons ever painted.

The subject is the mysterious story where Abraham receives three visitors as he camps by the oak of Mamre in Genesis 18.

The composition is a great circle around the table – at the center is the chalice-bowl/communion cup

From left to right, we see the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Notice that each person of the Trinity has differently colored clothing

- (on the left) The Father's clothing is translucent and transparent – it cannot be described or confined to words.
- (in the center) The Son has an earth-tone reddish brown garment and a blue cloak of heaven – the two natures of the God-man
- (to the right) The Holy Spirit is blue and green – sky/water and creation; heaven and earth. All that is alive owes its life to his active presence.

The dominant theme of the painting is one of hospitality:

- The table: represents the place of Abraham's hospitality to the Angels, but even more so God's hospitality to us. There is an open space at the table where the reader is invited to take a seat.
- The house: Over the head of the Father is a house with a front door that is always open. Not only that, but the house also has a tower whose window is also always open so that the Father can incessantly scan the roads for a glimpse of a returning prodigal.
- The tree: a place of shade, of rest, of safety and security

The painting catches the three in motion

- The Father's hand is raised in blessing toward the Son and the Spirit
- The Son and the Spirit bow their heads toward the Father in agreement
- The Son's hand on the table is directed toward the Spirit and the Spirit's hand is directed toward the chalice

The chalice – inside the cup at the center of the table is the sacrificed lamb.

I want to invite you to imagine that you are seated at the table in the open space. Around you sits the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Now imagine that you are listening in on their conversation – the eternal dialogue of the Trinity. It is the time before there was time – before the foundation of the world – in the beginning when the Word was with God, the Son face to face with the Father in the presence of the Spirit....

They are discussing making a creation.

WHO Creates: the whole Trinity is active in creation

Together, as Father, Son, and Spirit, we are God and there is no other. We are not three gods, but One; and yet in our oneness, we are three. There is nothing prior to us, and nothing other than us. We are all in all: co-equal, co-eternal, uncreated, indivisible, unchanging. None is greater than the other, and yet the Son is 'of' the Father, and the Spirit is 'of' the Father and the Son.

Together we are and together we always have been. We are life, and the life we are is love. Our love is like an extravagant banquet table spread out with the richest of fare. Around this table we share our love – the Father loves the Son with the Spirit, and the Son receives and returns that same love in the Spirit. Our communion in the Spirit is the ceaseless movement of our shared love.¹

We know no sadness or lack. We are fullness of joy.

We are not bored. Our life and love pulsate in infinite dynamism.

We are not lonely. There is no end to the mystery or our mutual being.

We have no conflict. We are one mind and one heart, in perfect harmony. Our attributes cannot be divided into parts. All that we do is done by all of us, and all that we are is Love.²

We have a good and true and beautiful thing going.

As we face one another around this table each of us lights up with happiness because of the others. Our joy is the shining forth of this glory.

Together, as one, we have all that we need....

How: in Freedom

And yet it would please us to share our life and love beyond ourselves.

It would please us to make a creation. Not because we need anything or will receive anything, but simply because it is fitting for the self-giving other-centered love we know and are to overflow and give ourself beyond ourself.

We are perfect love, yet we will “make love” by creating creatures who can share in Love’s love.

Yes, let us make something called “a human being” who can share in our joy and happiness.

Yes, let us create! Let the Father, Son, and Spirit *become* the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

Let there be a universe.

We will hand make the human being in our image.

¹ “Love...is not something God has and which may grow or diminish or cease to be. His love is the way God is, and when He loves He is simply being Himself.” (Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, 24) And I would add, when he is being himself, which he always is, he loves.

² “God is simple, uncomplex, one with Himself. The harmony of His being is the result not of a perfect balance of parts but of the absence of parts. Between His attributes no contradiction can exist. He need not suspend one to exercise another, for in Him all His attributes are one. All of God does all that God does; He does not divide Himself to perform a work, but works in the total unity of His being.” (Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, 23)

All that we do we do together. All of our actions are co-actions, for it is impossible for the Father to act apart from the Son, or the Son to act apart from the Father or the Spirit, or the Spirit to act apart from the Father and the Son.³

And so all things that we create, without exception, whether visible or invisible, will have their origin from the Father, and will exist for the Father. (1 Cor 8:6)

All things without exception, whether visible or invisible, will come into being *by* the Son, and apart from the Son nothing will come into being. (Jn 1:1-4) All creation will be *for* the Son, and *through* the Son all created things will have their existence, (1 Cor 8:6) and *in* him all things will be held together. (Col 1:15-17) By the power of his Word, he will uphold all things. (Heb 1:1-3)

As the Father is the fountain of all existence, the Son will be the Life which flows from that Fountain, by which all creatures will have their principle of life. (*Orations of St. Athanasius*, III.1)

In our fellowship, all creation will live and move and have its being (Acts 17:28).⁴

Only we have life in ourselves. All that we create, including the human beings, will have their being in us.

That which we create, while ‘other’ than us, is not ‘outside’ of us, for there is no ‘place’ or ‘space’ that exists beyond our being, and there is no ‘life’ that can exist ‘apart’ from the life that we are. We will make a womb for creation to be born inside us.

The Son will go ahead of them as the ‘firstborn’ human being, and he will be the image and reflection of our glory that they will one day be. He will be the radiance of our glory upon the earth.

Though our human creatures will turn away from us and seek to have life in themselves (even though that is impossible), they cannot separate themselves from us or stop us from loving them.

They can run, but they cannot hide:

“If they ascend to heaven, we are there; if they make their bed in Sheol, we will be there. If they take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there our hand shall reach them and hold them fast. If one of them were to say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,” even the darkness is not dark to us; we see just as well in the dark or in the light.” (Ps 139:7-12)

³ “The Persons of the Godhead, being one, have one will. They work always together, and never one smallest act is done by one without the instant acquiescence of the other two. Every act of God is accomplished by the Trinity in Unity.” (Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, 30)

⁴ We will not give them ‘life in themselves’ but we will freely share the life we have and are with them. The life they have and know will be as an echo of our Voice...as a reflection of our uncreated light. As a sunbeam perishes when cut off from the sun, so humankind apart from us will pass back into the void of nothingness. If they reject us as the ground of their existence and seek life independent from us, they will be throwing themselves back upon themselves. This would be death for them – a hell of their own making.

For they are not the sun, but a planet revolving around the sun. If they insist on being a sun in their own right, around which everything else must revolve, they will be abandoning life itself. (drawn from Tozer, 35-36)

Nothing will be able to separate them from our love (Rom 8)

And while they cannot undo the truth of their being which has its ground in us, nor can they separate themselves physically from us, we will give them the dignity of relational space. We will not force them to love, for a forced love cannot be love.

WHY do they create?

Our only motive for having a creation is to give ourselves away, which is to say to share our Life which is Love.

Like the ideal human father and mother, our love will produce children.

Love is our only reason.

We are not motivated to create because we need workers for our cause,

Nor because we have a list of rules we need creatures to keep for us,

We have no utilitarian motivations.

We need nothing.

Our only interest is to give ourself away.

And we are committed to giving ourself away in self-giving other-centered love regardless of the response we get from our creatures.

Our self-giving love is not conditional.

It is not contractual.

It is not based on their works, and so none of them can boast (Eph 2:8-10).

Our relation to the human creature will be completely one of grace, from “in-the-beginning” to “world-without-end.”

What we create will be an “all-embracing framework of Grace” “in which and through which” we will share with humanity the fellowship of our love.

This is our plan. This is our will. This is our purpose. The destiny of the human being will be to join us at our table.

We will accomplish our plan through the Son becoming one of them.

We will make a covenant with them, *and we will keep both sides of it.*

The Son will show and tell them what life with the Father in the Spirit is like. He will invite them to come and see what it means to be beloved children in the Father’s kingdom.

But the Son will do more than show and tell. He will also be the human being they were created to be. As a man, he will take up the same struggle they have, and rather than turning away from the Father’s voice and living in the darkness of lies and falsity, he will cling to the Father. He will trust. The light of our communion will not be broken in the darkness.

Though co-equal with the Father in his divinity, in his humanity he will be less than the Father and will humble himself and trust the Father into the darkness of death (Ph 2). The Son will do this, not to appease a monstrous Father's anger, but to put to death the old race of Adam and to gather up the whole ruined world with him and in him to the Father's table – to the banquet table of the Father, Son, and Spirit.

The Spirit's work will be to convince the human beings that they are not orphans in this world, but are included in the life of the Son. It will be the Spirit of adoption, welcoming them to our family table. It is the Spirit's role to enable them to taste and see the reality of our Life and Love.

The human beings will participate in our holy fellowship and become like us, imaging and reflecting us in the way they tend and serve their world.

In this way, they will participate in our life. Their life and joy will be in echoing our Triune love back to us. In this way they will image us and be who they are. Through their union with the Son, effected by the Spirit, they will be enabled to call God Father.

Move toward Communion:

And so we have made a table the symbol of our covenant commitment to you.

This table is your true home. This is your true country of citizenship.

At our table, each person is welcome.

- Whether you have much faith or little
- Whether you have been hear often or not for a very long time
- Whether you have been following Jesus or have tried and failed

This is a family meal, and you are included

There is a place already set for you.

There is a chair reserved with your name on it.

Come and sit.

At this table there is only right hand seating

If you have forgotten who you are, here you can listen and learn from us what is true.

Here, as you remember him, he re-members you. He reconnects you to his body so that you can play the part only you can play.

Prayer

Lord, pour out your spirit upon your body gathered here and upon these gifts of bread and wine, so that all who are gathered here today would know the truth that their home is in you, and be filled with your joy and love, and so be sent out as the body of Christ in the world.

The words of Institution

On the night on which Jesus was betrayed, he sat at supper with his disciples.

- (Taking and breaking the bread)

While they were eating, he took a piece of bread, said a blessing, broke it and gave it to them with the words, 'This is my body. It is broken for you. Do this to remember me.'

- (Taking the cup of wine)

Later, he took a cup of wine, saying, 'This cup is God's new covenant, sealed with my blood. Drink from it, all of you, to remember me.'

For every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord, until he comes.

Here is your Lord; he comes to you in the form of bread and wine, still wearing the wounds of his love. He comes to you in this moment in order to invite you to recognize him in every moment. These are the gifts of God for the people of God.

Taste and see that the Father, Son, and Spirit are good.

- (The bread and wine are shared.)

Concluding prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, you have put your life into our hands; now we put our lives into yours.

Just as you once took bread and blessed it and broke it and gave it to your disciples, so take us now and bless us by this meal that we might be broken and given away for the sake of the world you so dearly love. AMEN.