

## Romans 8:12-17

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— 13 for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

14 For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. 15 For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption.

When we cry, “Abba! Father!” 16 it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

## IT’S COMPLICATED

A movie, a romantic comedy I believe was entitled, “It’s Complicated.” That’s true romance is complicated. All our relationships are complicated. And this is true of our relationship with God as well. It’s complicated.

We live in a world where the sound bite is king. Everything is dumbed down to the point that it can fit on a bumper sticker.

But, life is complicated. In order to really understand anything we have to get beyond the bullet points. And this is especially true when it comes to faith.

If we want to talk about the nature of God and our relationship with God, it will require some effort on our part. We will need to talk about the doctrine of the Trinity.

Now I know that some of you think it’s too hard. But, we’re going to talk about it this morning because I believe you guys are up to the challenge. I believe you want more than dumbed down faith.

Each week in preparation for my sermon I listen to a podcast prepared by some professors at a Lutheran seminary. It’s called Sermon Brainwave, and usually their conversations are very helpful.

But, this week it wasn't so helpful.

They noted that this Sunday is Trinity Sunday, but they strongly advised their listeners not to preach on the Trinity. Now imagine this. These are seminary professors who think that the doctrine of the Trinity is too hard. Better not to confuse the folks in the pews with too much information about the nature of God.

Where angels fear to tread your pastor is about to go.

And yet it is the doctrine of the Trinity that distinguishes Christianity from other faiths. This doctrine defines us.

All of our Creeds and Confessions are organized around this doctrine. Apparently the early church didn't think that the doctrine of the Trinity was too hard for the average believer. Indeed they thought that we should think about this doctrine every week.

For example, when we say the Apostle's Creed each week we say, "I believe in God the Father. I believe in Jesus Christ. I believe in the Holy Spirit."

When the early church wanted to summarize the faith, they summarized it with the doctrine of the Trinity. When we baptize someone we do it in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Why do we do that? Why is the doctrine of the Trinity so important? The answer is complicated, but so is life and faith. There are no easy answers.

The nature of God is at the heart of what we do. I had a theology professor who said that every heresy that has plagued the church has been, at its root, a misunderstanding of the Trinity. If you get this wrong, you'll get everything else wrong.

And wrong theology invariably leads to wrong living.

So today we're going to talk about the Trinity. We're going to talk about the nature of God. Will you understand it completely when I get through with this sermon?

No. The mystery of God is too great to be contained in a sermon or even a thousand sermons.

But, we believe the nature of God is revealed in work of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God the Father, the Creator has chosen to come near to us through the work of his Spirit and in the life of His Son, Jesus.

God has chosen to reveal to us what we could not learn on our own.

## THE TRANSCENDENCE OF GOD

When we talk about God we usually do it in one of two ways. Sometimes we talk about the God who is above and beyond us, the Creator of all that is, the God who is different from us, and the God who judges our evil ways ... holy, holy, holy Lord God Almighty ... that kind of God.

This is GOD in all capital letters.

And this view of God is illustrated very well by the call of the prophet Isaiah.

He saw God “high and lifted up.” His vision is filled with symbols of the holiness, the otherness of God, and Isaiah is quite frankly dismayed by what he sees. Isaiah says,

“Woe is me. I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.”

This lofty view is also typical of many passages in the New Testament. Jesus takes seriously the problem of sin and pronounces judgment upon the injustice and immorality of the day.

In both the New and Old Testament God comes to judge the living and the dead. God is God the Almighty.

When we talk about God in this way we refer to transcendence of God.

## THE IMMANENCE OF GOD

And yet in both the Old and New Testament we see another side to God. God is the shepherd of his sheep. God delivers His people from slavery and guides them through the wilderness to the Promised Land. God forgives and restores His people after they are exiled for their sinful ways.

We refer to this as the immanence of God, the God who comes near.

In other words this transcendent, awesome God intervenes in the life of His people. God did not just create the universe and leave it to run on its on. Out of love God comes to His sinful and broken people and seeks to restore them.

Now God did not intervene as quickly as his people would have liked. In the Bible you can find examples of how the people longed for God to deliver them from exile or from the wilderness.

And yet salvation did not always come quickly. Life was a struggle. But, in the end the salvation of God prevailed. God brought His people home.

This is the story of the Bible. God is working his purposes out in the lives of His people.

God's people perceived the hand of God in the triumphs and tragedies of their nation's history. Looking back they could see that again and again God came near to save them from their sinful ways. God loved them too much to leave them alone.

When we look back on our lives we can see the same pattern. We see the hand of a loving God working for good despite our sinful ways and overwhelming struggles. We look back and draw strength for the future.

Many of you know the truth of that statement.

I have served this church long enough to know that almost everyone here has struggled in some significant way.

And yet God has often delivered you from your troubles in some amazing ways. And I firmly believe that one day God will bring all of us safely home.

## GOD WAS IN CHRIST

Christians believe that in Christ God came near to us in a special way. We say that God was in Christ.

Jesus gave us a unique human witness to divine grace. Jesus shows us what it means to be truly human, and Jesus shows us what it means to be truly divine.

Many in our society say they believe in a God, but they do not want God to be so specific, so down to earth so to speak. They want God to be more generic, abstract and above all vague.

In this way “god” can mean almost anything. And in the end this “god” often looks strikingly like us.

In Jesus we see that God became one with us, but the human way of God is quite different from what we might have expected. God’s ways are not our ways.

That’s what Paul is talking about in our lesson for today. The Apostle talks about those who live “according to the flesh.” Living according to the flesh makes men and women the measure of life. And according to Paul living in this way leads to spiritual death.

But, in Jesus God gave us a different measure. In Jesus God came close, too close for comfort for many.

In Jesus, God refuses to be a generic God. God refuses to be a vaguely benevolent being who never actually gets around to doing anything. God gets specific.

The kingdom of God as revealed by Jesus is about preaching good news to the downcast.

The kingdom of God as revealed by Jesus is about loving enemies and doing good to those who persecute you.

The kingdom of God is about trusting in the provision of God instead of obsessively worrying about money and the future.

In other words the kingdom of God as revealed by Jesus is almost exactly the opposite of how we live today. Why do you think so many thoughtful modern people are so determined to sever Jesus from the Trinity? Why do so many people want to make Jesus into a wonderful moral teacher who was kind to children and people with disabilities?

They want to tame Jesus. But, Jesus won't be tamed, not by them and not by us. Jesus won't remain just a kind moral teacher from the first century because he rose from the dead.

#### THE SPIRIT COMES NEAR

And the Spirit of the risen Christ is alive and active in the world today. In other words the transcendent God still comes near. God still loves us too much to leave us alone. God still intervenes in our lives.

God tells us that we don't have to live "according to the flesh." Life doesn't have to be "just one dam thing after another." Life can be lived "according to the Spirit." Life can be lived God's way instead of the world's way.

With us this is impossible. But, with God nothing is impossible. The Spirit enables us to live in this way.

The Spirit delivers us from slavery to the ways of the world. The Spirit helps us die to the old way of life and become new creations in Christ Jesus. Instead of being slaves to a spirit of fear, the Spirit of God in Christ enables us to live by faith.

In fact this passage teaches us that we become God's children. Through the leading of God's Spirit we are adopted into the household of God. God comes near to us in the Spirit of Christ, and that changes everything.

## ABBA

Through the power of the Spirit we led to call the Creator of the Universe, Abba, Father. This is a very familiar term. Perhaps the equivalent of Abba might be the word Daddy.

The divine becomes very personal. The transcendent One is once again described in very down to earth terms.

We have to be careful in using family imagery in describing God. Many have never known a loving father and so when we call God Father this language is not helpful or even disturbing.

Let's just say that God is the Father we all desire. God is the Father who truly listens to us in our time of need. God is the Father we can trust, the Father who takes away our fear. God is the Father who takes our hand, lifts us up, and leads us on.

The Spirit connects us with this compassionate Father God. The Spirit lets us know that we are God's children. The Spirit prays for us. The Spirit lifts our spirits when we are down. The Spirit takes away our fear.

## THE INHERITANCE

Paul tells the Romans that if they are children of God in Christ then they have an inheritance. They have their place in God's kingdom.

Many inheritances go unclaimed each year. People simply do not know that they are due an inheritance, and those responsible for taking care of the estate do not know how to contact the heirs. I am told that a rather large section of the New York Times is dedicated to unclaimed inheritances.

I wonder what that would be like, to suddenly discover that you were an heir to a tremendous fortune. Suppose you read your own name in the New York Times inheritance page? Can you imagine your joy and your surprise?

Well, that's the Bible tells us that this is why the transcendent God has come near. In Jesus and in His Spirit we learn the truth. We are heirs to the kingdom of God.

We have received the glory of God's forgiveness and salvation in Jesus. And we have been called to follow in the footsteps of Christ as well, to experience his suffering as well as his glory.

This past week I saw a TV special on the Queen of England. She attends over 400 events each year to represent her country and to welcome her people. Yes, she has glory. She lives in great splendor.

But, she also makes tremendous sacrifices. Because she is part of the royal family she has a certain role to play. The glory of the throne has a claim on her life.

In the same way the glory of God's kingdom as revealed in Jesus has a claim on our life. The Spirit of the risen Christ testifies not only to our status as adopted children of the king; we are also ambassadors for the kingdom.

We are called to deny our selves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus. When God comes near to us, God brings a challenge as well as an inheritance.

This should not come as a surprise to us. Jesus told us from the very beginning that following Him would not be easy. It's complicated. It's messy. It's difficult.

But, isn't that the way it is with most things that are important?

For example, family life is never easy. Suffering and sacrifice are a part of any significant relationship.

And yet we learn that despite our complicated and sometimes messy family relationships, something important, something sacred happens there.

The doctrine of the Trinity teaches us that God comes to us in the same way. I can't give you a definitive picture of what it will be like. It's complicated.

But, I do know from experience that God can make a way where there seems to be no way. God can bring salvation and forgiveness to our lives. God can bring us through the wilderness and into the Promised Land.

Like a good father or mother God is always ahead of us, planning for our future and encouraging us along the way.



And just like children we often reject God's encouragement and God's plans. God's ways are not our ways and because of that life in the kingdom sometimes brings a cross.

But, we know the rest of the story. We know that there is resurrection and hope on the other side. And that makes all the difference.

God the Almighty, the Creator of all that is still comes near.

The Spirit of the risen Christ still comes to bring new life to His disciples. Father, Son and Holy Spirit ... God in three persons blessed Trinity.

Amen.