

No Longer Slaves

Romans 8:12-17

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

May 26, 2024/Trinity Sunday

As we've already heard, today is Trinity Sunday in the Christian calendar. I'm not sure what your first reaction to this is. My guess is there is a range represented among us today.

Some did not grow up with the Christian calendar playing any kind of meaningful role in our faith or church experience. There was Easter, there was Christmas, and not much else. Seasons like Lent, Advent, Epiphany, and Pentecost hardly registered, much less special days like Transfiguration Sunday the Baptism of Jesus or Ash Wednesday. Or Trinity Sunday.

This was my experience. I have come to deeply appreciate the Christian calendar and the ways in which the church can order and mark time according to the life and ministry of Jesus. But it wasn't what I grew up with. And, truth be told, it still occasionally feels like I'm wearing someone else's clothes that sometimes fit a bit awkwardly.

Others did grow up with it. It has been part of your experience for as long as you can remember. It's just kind of part of the furniture of faith. Comfortable, familiar, an anchor.

But I doubt I'm going out on too much of a limb when I say that whatever you might think about the Christian calendar, many of us—perhaps or even *all* of us—struggle at least on some level with the doctrine of the Trinity.

Most Christians are ok to *confess* that God is three in one and one in three. But when it comes to *explaining it*, well, things get a lot fuzzier.

The math doesn't work. Three is not one. One is not three.

I encountered what I thought was the height of understatement in some of my reading this week. Speaking about Trinity Sunday and about the doctrine of the Trinity specifically, one

commentator said, rather drily I imagine, “understanding doctrinal issues is usually at the top of believers’ list of biblical interests” when they come to church.¹

Well, yes. I doubt many of you came to church this morning with a deep hunger for some clarity on the doctrine of the Trinity!

I do want to say a few words about the Trinity this morning. But I want to spend most of my sermon on other themes.

So, let’s start with the Trinity.

I can’t help with the math. But maybe there are a few useful things we can say about this deep mystery that is at the heart of the Christian faith.

To begin with, the word “Trinity” is never mentioned in the bible. Not once. The three-in-oneness of God is never explicitly described or stated in Scripture in the way that other doctrines might be.

Christian convictions about the Trinity are, rather, a *response* to God’s self-disclosure over time.

Earlier in the story, God reveals himself as Creator, as Father, as King, as Lawgiver, as Yahweh, the great “I Am.”

The ancient Hebrews were insistent that there was *one God* that was the source of all that existed, not many, as some of the neighbouring nations believed. There is no more foundational truth for the Jewish people than that God is one.

It’s right there in the first commandment. *You shall have no other gods before me* (Ex. 20:3). It’s in the *shema*, recited by faithful Jews every day, taken from Deuteronomy 6:4:

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

God is one. Simple.

¹ Clayton J. Schmit, “Homiletical Perspective on Romans 8:12-17” in *Feasting on the Word, Year B*, Vol. 3 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 39.

And then came Jesus, and people's conceptions of God had to change to accommodate the Son.

Suddenly Jesus was claiming to be and to do what only Yahweh could be and do. Suddenly Jesus was saying things like, "whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9) and "I and the father are one" (John 10:30).

The early church began to say things like, "He is the image of the invisible God," (Col. 1:15) and "the exact imprint of God's very being" (Heb 1:3).

And then, at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came to indwell and sustain and enliven his church in Jesus' physical absence. And people's conceptions of God once again had to change to accommodate this new manner of divine disclosure.

The Trinity describes the progressive revelation of God. It describes human beings attempts to be faithful to and to keep up *with* the God who is always out in front of us.

Whatever else the idea of God as "Trinity" reveals about God's nature and purposes for the world, it seems to me that at the *very least*, it describes a God that we *could* never and *would* never have come up with on our own!

God doesn't neatly fit into all our categories. There is mystery that we must live with, a recognition of the otherness of God. I think this is a good thing.

Ok, that's it for Trinity.

As you might guess from the title of my sermon, I want to focus primarily on verse 15.

For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption.

I've been pondering the contrast between these two "spirits" this week. A spirit of slavery and fear. And a spirit of adoption.

I think many people in our world and perhaps many of us in the church know slavery and fear quite well.

We are enslaved by so many things.

Some are enslaved by drugs and alcohol and the deadening escape or numbing of reality that they offer.

Some are enslaved by the pursuit of money or status, piling up accomplishments and degrees or zeroes on paycheques or followers on social media. We have all kinds of ways of separating the winners from the losers in this life.

Some are enslaved by fitness and diets, trying to achieve perfect bodies as a means of gaining the admiration of others, or perhaps futilely imagining we can fend off the creeping advance of time and mortality.

Some are enslaved by sex or pornography. Some churn through partners seeking to prove to themselves and others that they are special, beautiful, and worthy of love.

Some are enslaved by moralism, constantly seeking to demonstrate to themselves and others that they are the righteous ones, constantly exhorting others to get with the program.

Some are enslaved by entertainment, whether it's movies, TV series, sports, each offering an escape from reality, an opportunity to take refuge in other worlds to avoid engaging the real one as God has called us to.

In our time, many are enslaved by technology. So many. Our phones condition us to constantly be checking our messages, our notifications, social media, all in an attempt, again, to prove to ourselves and others that we are important, that we are connected, that *we matter*.

And running through all of these, at least on some level, is our slavery to fear. Fear of not measuring up. Fear of being rejected. Fear of condemnation, of being judged and found wanting (by those around us, by God). Fear that we'll be seen as we are.

And ultimately, of course, fear of death. Fear of getting older, of what trials may be on the horizon. Fear of losing those we love.

Fear of our own deaths, of what's on the other side, about whether God is even real or can *actually* be trusted.

My guess that the picture I've just painted is not one that is foreign to us. We see it all around us. And we see it in our own hearts and minds.

To borrow Paul's language, we are enslaved by our "sinful nature" or "the flesh," as some translations put it. We are enslaved by our own destructive tendencies.

And death hovers over all of this as the final menace, threatening to undo all that we are and all that we have done.

What are we to do? Well, Paul tells the church in Rome to put the sinful nature to death. And we might be forgiven for thinking, "yeah, well sounds pretty good, Paul, but it's not quite that simple."

But I think it's important to note what Paul doesn't say. He doesn't look at this whole list of things that enslave us and drag us away from the freedom for which we were created, and say, "Well, just try harder! Do better!"

Paul knows very well that this will not work. One short chapter earlier in Romans 7, Paul bears eloquent witness to the inner conflict of desperately *wanting* to do the right thing but being unable to do so.

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do... So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me... What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?

Who hasn't resonated with this at some point in their lives?

So, Paul doesn't say, "do better, try harder." Instead, he reminds us of who we are. Dearly loved, adopted children of God.

(If Paul's anything like most preachers, he's preaching to himself even as he's preaching to others!)

I don't think the importance of this can be overstated. Until we are secure in the knowledge that we are loved, accepted, that we belong, that God has chosen us, forgiven us, redeemed and saved us, we will never really be able to leave slavery and fear behind.

It sounds simple, I know. I think most of us could recite this as the correct answer on the test. But I think that many, *many* people, struggle to actually believe that they are loved and accepted

This is what so many people hunger for today. This is what is at the root of so many of our pursuits down dead-end roads.

Our time is defined by a kind of unsettled restlessness, a lack of community, "chronic loneliness" and "weakened social ties." We are always moving on to the next thing, the next job, the next relationship, the next place, the next purchase, the next... whatever.

I think that each of these, in different ways, points to the same basic feature about us as human beings: We are looking for home.

We are looking for acceptance, for welcome, for embrace. For a place where we can step off the performance treadmill, where we can cease our frantic striving to do enough, be enough, attain enough, and simply rest secure in our identity as children of God.

And this is the good news Paul speaks of in our text today.

Our belonging in God's family does not depend on our ethnicity, our denominational background, our moral performance, our ability (or inability) to keep the law and all its demands.

It does not depend on our ability to carve out some kind of status or identity for ourselves to prove that we are unique or special or noteworthy.

It does not depend on what others think of us or on the often-cruel evaluations of an online world. It doesn't depend on *anything* we bring to the table.

It is rooted, quite simply, in the love of God, and the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Who will rescue me from this inner conflict, Paul asks? His answer: “Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

Whenever I am struggling with how to end a sermon, I tend to think in terms of three questions.

1. What does this text tell us about who God is?
2. What does this text tell us about who we are?
3. What future does this text invite us into?

First, who is God?

God is three-in-one.

The Holy Spirit bears witness with our Spirits that we are children of our heavenly Father. And we are co-heirs with Christ, sharing in both his sufferings and his glory.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God seeking and suffering and saving his dearly loved children, creating one family out every tribe and tongue.

But, again, trinitarian math can be hard. My favourite image in this passage is simply God as our adoptive father.

Second, what does this text tell us about who we are?

Quite simply, we are God’s children.

This perhaps sounds trivial and obvious, but it’s not. We are not servants of a cruel master or insignificant cogs in the divine machinery of a rather impersonal universe. We are not accidents or mistakes.

We are members of a family—a big family with all kinds of children, all united and enlivened by the same Spirit, all looking ahead to a future of peace and justice, truth and love.

We are not orphans, as Jesus says in John 14:18 when he promises the coming of the Holy Spirit.

We were made for God, made for each other, and made for this earth. We were made to participate with God in the making of all things new.

Third, what does this text invite us to be and to do?

Choose life. Choose the Spirit of adoption over the spirit of slavery and fear.

Leave the chains of earning behind. Believe the good news of God's gracious salvation.

I want to close with the words of 1 John 4:17-19. I think that in many ways it sums up one of the central themes of this morning.

Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgement, because as he is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹We love because he first loved us.

I hope you can hear these words as an encouragement this morning.

We are no longer slaves to fear. We are children of God.

Amen.

