

I. Advanced Organizer

A. My experience coming to faith:

1. **Praying where to go to school.** Having a sense touring Northwestern. Interested in getting to know this God but didn't know who he was. Theatre student shows up at my class. Starting Group for Theatre People interested in Learning About God. Chills. Went to group, praying and singing to Jesus and something broke open in me. Experienced an unconditional love and acceptance I'd never experienced. Began important journey of healing for me.
2. But wasn't sure that it was only about Jesus: that Christians had the market on this God thing. So I declared a double major in religion. Started taking classes like intro to Buddhism, classes in Islam, Judaism, classes examining various strains of Christianity. Classes comparing how various religion regarded women, or classes on how various religions produced or were depicted in art, literature, or film. Fascinating stuff.
3. Over a few years of this, three things became clear to me.
 - a) **There was much common ground and common goals that these faiths shared.** Much to be admired, whatever your faith perspective is in all of them.
 - b) There were also **places of real non-trivial difference in their views of the world, ultimate reality.**
 - c) For me, the **Jesus centered faith was uniquely helpful in making sense of my own experiences and connecting me with a divine story and faithful community.**
4. This has continued to be the case. There are still things I've come to admire and learn from other faiths, and through the years I've been hugely enriched and even feel like I've become a more faithful Jesus follower because of my relationship with or influences from folks outside of my faith, or from other faiths, but I also cannot deny the unique fruitfulness I've experienced connecting with God through Jesus. For me, faith in Jesus is central and always will be.

II. New Series on Vision: "Vision; What we mean?"

A. Looking at 3 core values I presented last week

B. First one: what do we mean when we say, "Jesus-Centered"?

1. admittedly a big topic to address in one talk; can only scratch the surface.
2. points I shared in the broad overview:
 - a) **Sees Jesus as uniquely helpful in connection with God (as I shared in my own journey)**
 - (1) This doesn't mean necessarily exclusive. In Blue Ocean our primary metaphor is "Centered Set". We don't define our groups by categories of shred characteristics, bounded sets, but what we're oriented toward.
 - (2) Jesus himself said provocative things like he was going to "draw all people to himself" or describing himself as a shepherd that he was going to "bring other sheep not of this pen". Room for humility around God's perspective on various faiths and how He is connecting with people throughout human history, while also affirming the good life we are experiencing through Jesus-centered faith.
 - b) **Pursues interactive connection with Jesus through the Holy Spirit.**
 - (1) Recognizes that Jesus pitched the Holy Spirit, and with it, a new understanding of who God really is or how might understand and experience the Divine. To follow Jesus is to take on this perspective on God.
 - c) **Bible plays a significant role in affirming that connection**
 - (1) We'll talk about this more in our "Back to Basics" series this summer - but this reminds us that in Blue Ocean we are trying to be "Solus Jesus" vs. "Sola Scriptura".

This “alone” statement is talking about authority. What has the final authority on how we live our faith...Jesus, not the Bible. Recognizing that Bible is really helpful in giving us the context and leading us into the story of connection with God, but it's not ultimately the connection with God itself. The Bible should lead us to an interactive relationship with Jesus. He becomes the focal point of it and the lens through which we read, and our interactive partner in understanding and applying it. Jesus himself says, “You search the Scriptures because you think they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to me! Yet you refuse to come to me to receive this life.” (John 5:39-40)

(2) Builds on Christian orthodoxy, while recognizing the complexity of interpretation.

(a) Roger Olson - *Dogma, doctrine, opinion. Various levels of Christian thought.*

i) The first category of Christian belief is **Dogma**.

(1) Theologians understand this to be truths essential to Christianity itself. These statements are about who God is, and particularly who Jesus is. The Apostles and Nicene creeds are the most central formulations of Christian dogma; to deny them is to follow something other than Jesus. But not all Christian belief is on the level of dogma.

ii) The second level is **Doctrine**.

(1) These can often be understood as beliefs that groups of Christians regard as the implications of their dogma. Doctrinal disputes tend to be the things that cause Christian movements to splinter. How baptism should happen, how God is present with us in communion, how the Holy Spirit is manifest can all be examples of doctrine.

iii) The third level is **Opinion**.

(1) This is everything else. These are speculative matters about which there's really no consensus in the church. What kind of worship music is the best, should church happen in large settings or small, are there particular styles of teaching that are the most effective...

C. So we've unpacked a bit of the general overview of what we mean when we say Jesus centered. Now I want to spend the rest of our time considering a particular passage and using it to delve a little deeper into our understanding of Jesus-centered Trinitarian faith. I think the Gospel writers had a Jesus-centered view of the Scriptures and their faith and in this passage we're gonna look at, we see John try to help his followers understand how Jesus fits into their whole unfolding understanding of the Divine. Big picture view that I think is helpful to think about and remember as we consider what it means for us to be Jesus-centered.

III. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it....

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as

of a father's only son, full of grace and truth...From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

A. OK, so this is a **dense theological passage**, right? **John uses a lot of metaphor**, and it's not always clear what the images are supposed to communicate. **We don't have time to dig into all of it today**, but I wanted to read it all to give us a sense of this broad picture that John is painting as he sets up the story of the life of Jesus. This is the backdrop he wants established before everything else he's going to say.

B. And right from the beginning he starts with what I think is one of the most mysterious phrases in Scripture: **"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."**

1. Who or what is the "Word"? Among other things the Word here means the **communication or revelation of God**. It's another name for the Son of God and reminds us that part of what makes the Son unique is that **he reveals the identity of God**.
2. "The Word was with God and the Word was God." Now that contrast is confusing, isn't it? The Word was with God and the Word was God? How can it be both? And here we have officially reached one of the most mysterious elements of Christian thought, what theologians like to call "the Doctrine of the Trinity." Welcome to **Theology 101**.
 - a) Now here we're focused on two persons, but there are clearly other places that point us to three. We won't spend much time looking at them, but one of the best examples for a view of the trinity is the story of **Jesus' baptism**. Jesus goes into the water to be baptized by John the baptist, and as he comes up out of the water, the sky opens and the Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove and rests on Jesus, and a loud audible voice booms out, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." It looked something like this. (**Trinity at Baptism Slide**). There we have three persons of the trinity illustrated in one place – The Father's voice affirms the identity of his Son, while the Spirit descends on him.
 - b) So how does this relate to our passage? Well, again we have this phrase, the Word was God. Probably a better translation of what John was saying would be actually, **"What God was, the Word was."** What's the difference? Well, the first translation is helpful because it communicates that Jesus, or the Word, is actually God. However, what's hard about it is that it kind of collapses Jesus' identity into God. We're not sure if he's distinct from the Father or just a reflection or manifestation of Him. But to say that "what God was, the Word was" highlights a unique characteristic about the relationship between the Father and the Son – that they are each distinct persons, yet they are wholly unified. They are of the same "stuff" - what one is, the other is (and by implication, the same is true of the Spirit). There is variety in the midst of unity.

C. Now if your head is spinning a bit: fear not. You wouldn't be the first. Christians throughout the centuries have struggled with conceiving of the trinity and have often fallen into various problematic pitfalls throughout the ages. I'll lay out a few of these main ones, which many Christians have historically identified as **heresies**. I'm going to do that to help us understand a bit more how not to understand the trinity. My hope is that these will not intimidate or paralyze us, but help us walk closer into understand God as God really is. We'll get there by considering who God isn't.

IV. Views of the Trinity.

A. Orthodox -

1. So the core of the doctrine of the Trinity is that there is one God in three persons – the Father, the Son, and The Holy Spirit. Here is a classic illustration of what this looks like. **(Orthodox Slide.) These three persons are each unique, but they are also united,** sharing the same substance, the same “stuff” as I mentioned before. Each person is God and none of them are the same as the others.
2. So it is not the same as **say Leah wearing three different hats and playing different roles in her life at different times.** Because I do that, right? Each of us does. But let's take me for example. I have a number of roles I play each day. One is the family role – I'm a wife and mother. Another is the professional role – I'm a pastor. Another for me is I'm becoming the PTA president. I switch between these roles several times a day, and sometimes I multitask and fulfill more than one at a time. But this is not what the trinity is asserting. To believe God functioned in this way would be called the heresy of Modalism.

B. Modalism

1. **(Modalism Slide.) Modalism suggests that God operates in different modes in different times.** Sometimes God goes into Father mode, sometimes Son mode, sometimes Spirit mode, but it's all essentially the one God acting in different modes. But clearly from our passage, that can't be the case. The Father and the Son had unique identities eternally, or as John says it, echoing the writer of Genesis, “from the beginning”.

C. Tritheism

1. Now on the other extreme is a heresy called **Tritheism**; the **belief in three Gods**. One creative artist illustrated it this way. **(Tritheism Slide.)** Here the distinctiveness of the persons of God is emphasized, but their unity is lost. Especially for those coming from a Jewish background, the peers of Jesus, this would be a non-starter. A central affirmation of the Jewish faith has long been the *Shema*, an important prayer that observant Jews repeat daily from Deuteronomy. “Hear, Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.” **The trinity is NOT a belief in three Gods, but one God in three persons.** Now most Christians would never confess to worshiping three Gods, but I would argue that many **churches do something in that direction when they prioritize one of the three persons as if that person was a God alone.** Jesus might be the only thing they talk about, as if the picture we have of Jesus in the Bible is the only picture of God at all. In other traditions you see the Holy Spirit dominating the church's conception of God, but if you don't have the three persons working together in cooperative unity, you don't have the Trinity.

D. Arianism

1. Finally, one last common misconception about the trinity gets confused when **considering the relationship between the Father and Son.** This misconception called **Subordinationism or Arianism**, from one of its chief proponents. **(Arianism Slide.)** This teaches that the **Father is the real deal God, and the Son and the Spirit basically answer to Him.** Folks here may believe that for God the Father to actually be the Father, then God the Father must have at some point created the Son, and likely the Spirit. This makes sense when we consider our own experience of parenthood. All of us who are parents know that we had a life before our children. In the same way, it is easy to conceive of God the Father as a God who had a life before his kid. But the problem with that is that if it's true, that God the Father came first, then it means that the Son is not eternal. This isn't the point of view that John is taking, he says that the Word was present from the beginning. More importantly, the idea that God reveals himself and redeems creation through Jesus can only be really true if Jesus has all the power of God; if he is fully God. And if he and the Spirit are created by God at a specific point in time, then they are really less than God, and thus they don't carry the full power for redemption. So, though for ages Christians

have at times perceived Jesus and the Spirit as lesser than God the Father, **this is not orthodoxy**. The important point to remember here is that **there is no hierarchy in God**, the three persons are co-equal. **All three are eternal and none of them are more powerful than the others. (Orthodox Slide.)**

E. Understanding the importance of relationship.

1. So how do we conceive of a Triune God without falling into modalism, tritheism, or Arianism? I believe the focus has to be on **relationship**. What we're talking about when we talk about the trinity is ultimately an **intimate, cooperative, loving set of relationships**. When people say "God is love" they're speaking truth, but it's not an abstract pretty sentiment. **It's real relating-love**. It's people laying down themselves for one another love. It's people honoring each other, honoring the uniqueness of each. It is intimacy. It is knowing and being known. It is rejoicing in the other. **THAT is love. God must be more than one person in order for God to be love**. The Father is the **eternal source of love**, eternally generating affection which is poured out in all of his creation but the source needs an object, an object that is ultimately equal to it for that love to be mutual. And so we have the Son, eternally existing as the object the Father, or Source, can fully love, and reciprocating that love, giving it right back to the Source.

a) **Charles Finney**, a revivalist in the 19th century, suggested that **perhaps the love between the Father and the Son, back and forth, was so full, so vibrant, so alive and electric, that the love itself was its own person of the Godhead**. Now again, we're entering the realm of mystery, so we must speak carefully and with humility, but it is an interesting idea: the Father ever producing love, the Son, ever receiving and reflecting it back, the Spirit the embodiment of that mutual self-sacrificial love itself.

F. So if this is true, at the center of the universe, of all creation, is active love. It's family at its best. Every person is who they are but they are all working in unity. They are all deeply connected to one another. They find their ultimate identity in connection. And we are invited to know and be known by this God. We are invited into the triune joy; the relationship within God, Godself. This is the whole point of the gospel. That God's joy is so extreme that God longs for all of God's creation to experience it and to enjoy that kind of relational safety and community. God is community, and therefore God believes it is not good for any man or woman to be alone. For we were made to dwell in the divine community. We are made to be children of God. Objects of the divine love, that like Jesus can receive it and reflect it back to their Source.

1. But there was a catch. **Humanity rejected that kind of relating**. Again and again, humans chose their own power and privilege over dwelling humbly within the love of God. And so, the Divine Love we call God hatched a plan for redemption. And this brings us to the other important line from our passage that we need to consider to understand Jesus. *"The Word became flesh and lived among us"*. The eternal Son, the second person of the trinity, became a human being and lived with human beings. In theological terms, we call this the **incarnation**.

G. The Incarnation illuminates another theological paradox of Jesus centered faith. Jesus in some manner leaves the community of the Godhead, separates himself in some way for a finite period of time, and becomes a human being.

1. But what kind of person was he like? Was he invincible? Was he a "man of steel" (like Superman) who simply looked like a human being? Actually, that's not the story the gospels paint at all.
2. The story that they tell is a story of great humility. It's a story of pain and suffering. **Jesus is a man of sorrows**. When he experiences loss, he grieves. When he's constantly called

upon, he gets tired. The author of Hebrews tells us that he can empathize with our weaknesses, but he was tempted in every way without sinning. Tempted in every way. Tempted to seize power and privilege. To exploit it. Tempted to deceive others. Tempted sexually, though he lived 33 years and never had sex. But he was tempted! No, Jesus was not Superman. He was not walking among people only appearing to be human, but truly invincible. No, he lay down his superpowers and he embraced the vulnerability of the people he loved so he could be with them and demonstrate true love.

3. The Apostle Paul gave us one of the **most beautiful depictions of the incarnation when he wrote these words to the church in Philippi**. He described Jesus this way,

***“though he was in the form of God,
[he] did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
7 but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
8 he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.
9 Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
10 so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11 and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.”***

4. **Before Jesus was exalted and given the name above every name, he emptied himself.** He was born in human likeness. He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. One of the most shameful deaths in his day. And Jesus gave himself to it. He embraced what the world called shame. He took it on himself. He left the majesty of the community of the Godhead for poverty, for frailty, for pain, for a shameful death. And he did it in love. As he said himself the night he was betrayed, **“no one has greater love than this; to lay down one's life for one's friends.”**
5. For me, this incarnation, this **God who out of love leaves perfection to connect with us in the human experience of frailty, pain, disappointment, struggle, even taking on the suffering of submission to human cruelty, and violence is part of what has set Jesus apart for me from all other expressions of God.** This is how Jesus has moved my heart in totally unique ways. Because he has validated my pain, my suffering, my questions, my struggle through entering into it, not calling me to escape from it. And as he does this, he also invites me to follow his lead in the work of leaning into both the beauty and the brokenness that are partners in the human experience.

- H. So what does I mean? I mean that Jesus's incarnation reminds us that if we are to be people who say we want to follow Jesus, we want to be his body, we want to be a part of the work he is still doing to redeem his creation, we want to be a Jesus-centered community, **we have to ask ourselves what kind of incarnation are we called to?** No, we are not God ourselves but we have been brought into divine community. We have been welcomed into the active love

that is within the triune God. We experience the Father, the Son, and the Spirit in our midst, here. But is that experience just for us? Or are we **called to continue the work that Jesus was doing by incarnating the world in a similar way?**

1. The story of the gospel is a story of love in action. **It is a story that recognizes that the party is not complete until people are there to enjoy it.** Remember one of the parables Jesus used: comparing the kingdom of God to a banquet. This huge banquet was being thrown, but as the story goes, all the guests began to cancel. And so the master had the servants open the doors and compel people to come in. He wanted his house to be full. In the same way the triune God wants all to experience his party.
2. **And so the Father sends the Son. And after the Son does his work he sends the Spirit to us, to the church.** And the spirit isn't just sent so we could experience God for ourselves, though that's huge. But it's sent so that we can be sent in the same way Jesus was. So that we can incarnationally do what he did. So that we can be Jesus again and again and again in all kinds of places and cultures and subcultures, opening the door into divine community.
3. **If Jesus is calling Haven to be a Jesus-centered community, then Jesus is calling us to this kind of project.** There's plenty of things we can say about what it means to be Jesus centered, and that's something we consider from different facets in everything we do here, but if we take the wide angle view and try to distill it down, **I think a core call of the Jesus-following life, and the Jesus-centered community is to follow Jesus in his work of revealing the love that is God through the work of incarnation.**

V. As we end, I want to consider: **How do we live an incarnational life?** How are we called to emulate Jesus in that way?

- A. **Call to humility.** We're called to lay down our power and privilege, to empty ourselves, just as the Son did. When Paul wrote his beautiful description of the incarnation., that is clearly what he had in mind. **The model of Jesus' humility is to be our model.** Pointing to that picture he urged them, ***“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. 5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...”*** He is calling Jesus-followers to embody the humility, the self-sacrifice, the laying down of privilege that Jesus embodied. **This is a vital part of what it means to live an incarnational life, a Jesus-centered life.**
- B. **Call to identification.** ***“The Word became flesh and lived among us.”*** Jesus didn't just appear as a 30 year old man and start preaching. He could have done that. But no. He was born a helpless infant. He lived a mundane, ordinary life. He had a childhood. He was trained as a carpenter. He went to synagogue. He celebrated the Jewish holidays. He learned their prayers. He sang their songs. He ate their food. He spoke their cultural language in every way. And because he was one of them he could communicate to them. He could speak in a way they could understand. But it started with purely being present in a particular time and space to a particular people. He lived their 30 years before harvesting any fruit. **Identification.** Jesus centered community is called also to be communities that identify with the world they are called to incarnate.
 1. **What does this mean? A call to inhabit a space, a culture, a community.** Like we spoke of a few weeks ago, a call to inhabit the East Bay and connect. To eat the food, to learn the music, to speak the cultural language. And then to allow Jesus, through the Spirit, to lead us in being revealers of the Divine Triune Love in that identified context.

- C. As we end, question to you to consider with Jesus: Take a moment for reflection. ***Where Is Jesus calling you in practical ways to become less? Who is Jesus calling you to identify with?***