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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
5/30/2010, Trinity Sunday  
Genesis 18:1-15, John 16:12-15

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It is springtime. Let us speak of love.

I begin with one of the Bible's great epistles on love: First John. Let me lift up a couple verses from Chapter IV of that book:

<sup>7</sup>Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup>He who does not love does not know God; for God *is* love...

And then, moving ahead a few verses, we find this teaching about the nature of God repeated and intensified:

<sup>16</sup>God *is* love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. (1 John 4:7-8, 16, RSV)

Let us take these three little words in this passage and rejoice in them to the utmost: "God is love."

We live in a tough world, a fallen world, a world in which we suffer not only Hamlet's "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," but even worse, the determined opposition of Satan. He hates us. He would destroy us. And he is a formidable enemy. The signs of his cruel intentions usward are all around.

But in our text, St. John contemplates the old, old story of Jesus and his love and carries his joy to the maximum limit: the apostle concludes that "God *is* love." For the apostle, it is not simply that God loves, not even that he loves *very much*, but rather that he *is* love. He is not a mixture of love and something else. No, God simply is love. There is not shadow of hatred or indifference in him. Every impulse of his great soul is love. And whatever he does, whether he comforts, exhorts, judges, even punishes, he does from love, with an aim that we should flourish, even that we should have abundant life.

Let us take these three little words in this passage and rejoice in them as much as we can: "God is love." We learned this lesson in Sunday school long ago, I bet we did! In a way, it is the most important thing we could have learned in Sunday School: the story of Jesus means that God is love.

This is Trinity Sunday. I have a proposal for you about the doctrine we celebrate today -- the high doctrine of the Holy Trinity. I urge that when thinking about this high doctrine, it helps to begin with St. John's rapturous claim: God is love!

According to the doctrine of the Trinity, we believe “in one God in three persons.” The Athanasian Creed, which summarizes centuries of Trinitarian and Christological controversies, puts the matter this way:

We worship one God in trinity and the Trinity in unity, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the divine being.

So, that is our teaching. That is what we confess before the world: We believe in one God in three persons. Ahh, but how to understand that teaching? What I am trying to do in this sermon is to save us from an unnecessary incoherence. I mean this: when we say that we believe in “one God in three persons,” we are not quite saying that “we believe in one *Person* in three *persons*,” for that would make no sense.

No, when thinking about God, I want us to stick with what St. John says about God: God is love. Love is personal. It involves persons. In the case of our God, it involves Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But God is neither one of them. God is more along the lines of their Love.

So, when thinking about our God, think of three persons sitting around a table. Think of three persons wholly dedicated to love. Think of their every thought, their every plan, every impulse of their hearts being directed toward love. Think of them as individual persons, with differing contributions to their joint life of love, and think of you and me and our whole world as their beloved!

Think of them, I say, along the lines of the three holy Visitors to Abraham and Sarah in this morning’s Bible story (Genesis 18)

Three visitors suddenly appear to Abraham. We know from the text that the three are somehow “the LORD.” Interestingly, Abraham addresses them in the *singular*, but he faces *three* persons. We need not claim that the Bible is teaching the doctrine of the Trinity here. Nonetheless, the early Church Fathers interpreted these three holy visitors as a foreshadowing of the Holy Trinity. This story is like a parable or a picture to help us think about God.

On the cover of this morning’s worship folder, we have a copy of Rublev’s icon of the Holy Trinity:



In this famous icon, the LORD appears to Abraham and Sarah as three men sitting around a table at a meal. It is a beautiful image of God. The three figures are united in a common undertaking, with their heads tilted toward one another as if they are in intimate conversation. Each figure is beautifully painted. They are graceful and have a very peaceful countenance about them. You may notice that they sit around the table on three sides leaving the side of the table that faces us open. That is deliberate. It is meant to say to the one looking on, come and join us! Come and sit with us and enter into our companionship. Come and break bread with us! Come and be a part of our family!<sup>1</sup>

On Trinity Sunday, this is my theme: When thinking about God, think of the three holy Visitors and their dealings with Abraham and Sarah.

Let's make some quick observations:

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<sup>1</sup> These notes on Rublev's icon come from one of my wife Carol's sermon on the Holy Trinity.

First, these three holy visitors are not ashamed to share company with mere human beings. Here we are, dust and ashes, in the end. Our lives are fleeting and we are too much caught up in sin. All we like sheep have gone astray<sup>2</sup> and have fallen short of the glory of God<sup>3</sup>. And yet, our God does not withhold himself from humanity. As these three holy visitors are glad for the company of Abraham and Sarah, so God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are glad for your company.

Second, these three holy visitors are kind to Abraham and Sarah. How? They promise, and therefore make it so, that Abraham and Sarah will have a baby. In this way, they minister to the deepest longings of their souls.

Third, these three holy visitors rise entirely above the normal constraints on things. Certainly it is true that Abraham and Sarah are old. In the ordinary course of things, they are too old to have children. But the LORD is free to go beyond that. They ask, Is anything too hard for the LORD? (Genesis 18:14, RSV)

And fourth, they are lovers of truth. Sarah laughs at the news that she will have a baby. They gently confront her about that. She denies that she laughed, but they simply say,

Then Sarah denied, saying, I laughed not; for she was afraid. And he said, Nay; but thou didst laugh. (Genesis 18:15, KJV)

The only thing that is missing in this story is the cost! The thing that is not yet revealed about our God in this story is that one of the three divine Persons shall, in the fullness of time, be born of the Virgin Mary, take on our humanity, and die fighting for us. Love compels him to that sacrifice. God *is* love.

In the early days of the Church, St. Paul preached a great sermon Athenians. We read this in Acts 17. You might recall that St. Paul speaks respectfully to the Greek intellectuals gathered around him. At this point they do not know the Bible, they do not know the faith of Israel nor of the Church. Still, they are inheritors of a wonderful tradition of philosophy, drama, and art, and they are a pious people who have temples and altars to all kinds of gods, including an altar to what they call “the unknown god.” St. Paul takes advantage of this idea of an “unknown god” to teach the Athenians about the God of the Church, the Maker of heaven and earth.

The apostle begins by quoting a line from a Greek poet:

<sup>28</sup>For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring. (Acts 17:28, KJV)

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<sup>2</sup> All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:6, KJV)

<sup>3</sup> For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; (Romans 3:23, KJV)

What I want on Trinity Sunday is that we take this line to heart and interpret it in a Trinitarian way: We live and move and have our being surrounded by the love of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

That is why love is so important to us. That is why love rings true, as if when we turn to love, we are at last moving toward peace. We are at last moving toward harmony with the world.

There are many fine things to be desired in this world, including wealth, beauty, respect, and power. But most fundamentally, we are made by a God who is love, and therefore love is our most natural home. I believe that is what lies at the heart of our wanting to be with a loved one when they breathe their last breath on this earth.

My wife Carol told me about a research project in which people were asked what they wanted most at the time of their death. They could have said, "I want a good conscience. I want the respect of others. I want the sense that I lived my life well." But the actual answer was more simple. Almost everyone said, "I don't want to die alone." We want our loved ones around us. Or at least we want to have the opportunity to say good-bye to them. How often do we hear that the dying person hung on until that special person arrived, and then they could go in peace?

We are made for love. We are made by the God of love, the God who is love. With love we flourish and our life has meaning and purpose. We take delight in being with the people we love.

That is why St. Augustine was able to preach his famous words in one of his sermons on our text from First John Chapter IV, on the words "God is love." Augustine's line goes this way:

Once for all, then, a short precept is given thee: Love, and do what thou wilt: whether thou hold thy peace, through love hold thy peace; whether thou cry out, through love cry out; whether thou correct, through love correct; whether thou spare, through love do thou spare: let the root of love be within, of this root can nothing spring but what is good. (St. Augustine, Homily on 1 John IV. 4-12)

Love, then, in the manner of Jesus Christ, and do what thou wilt! Love, then, in the manner of the Father, and do what thou wilt! And love, then, in the manner of the Holy Spirit, and do what thou wilt. Your doing, whatever it is, will be upheld by the God who is love, the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to whom belongs glory now and forever. Amen.