

Today marks the start of a new series for us, titled, “THE MYSTERY UNRAVELED: Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians.” The heart behind this series, as we continue our way through the New Testament, is to be confronted with some of the great mysteries of our faith. If we, for a second, think that what we believe is common sense, or obvious, or easily understood, we’re clearly not paying attention.

In this faith that has brought each of us hope, beyond all understanding, there are enormous mysteries. Mysteries of why things happen, why things happened, how things work, what role we play in all of this... This is a 5-week series where we’ll cover little topics like: The Trinity, how we go from “death to life”, the different gifts we each have, how we can live as “light-filled people” and lastly how to love one another in submission. None of these things are “LIFE: 101.”

These are deeper conversations of the heart. These will get into our identities, how we interact with God, and how we understand the lives we’re living.

And today... perhaps one of the most easily understood topics: The Trinity. The three distinct members of one, single God. Our monotheistic religion with polytheistic undertones. We have God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit. But how? Or more importantly... Why?

How do we begin unraveling the Mystery of the Trinity, and what it means for us today?

And now becomes important, the task of defining what we mean by “Mystery.” Fr. Richard Rohr defines mystery not as something that cannot be understood, but as something that can be endlessly understood.

Meaning, even after years of investigation, we will never find an end to the great mysteries of life. We will never reach a full and final definition or satisfactory explanation of what it means to love one another, or the pain you feel when someone else is hurting, or what it feels like to be on the receiving end of extravagant generosity. We will never FULLY comprehend what it means to live in a Trinitarian way, or how we’ve been “raised from the dead” (while being alive the whole time).

But that doesn’t mean that we don’t try to understand it at all. It doesn’t mean we give up. Or that ignorance is bliss. It doesn’t mean we don’t try to hang words on the whole experience and use metaphor to breathe beauty into it all.

Mystery is not something that can’t be known, it is something that can be endlessly known and investigated and understood.

God invites us to know Him. In Isaiah 43:10...

*“You are my witnesses, O Israel!” says the Lord. “You are my servants. You have been chosen to know me, believe in me and understand that I alone am God.” Isaiah 43:10 NLT*

Those of you that have been walking with God for decades know that—yes, you have had beautiful revelations and awakenings along the way, massive spiritual breakthroughs—but you know you haven’t arrived anywhere final.

Perhaps, true wisdom would be knowing that the more we learn, the more we realize how little we know. We will never reach the end of knowing God.

In fact, Paul, the same man who wrote this letter to the Ephesian church, writes in 1 Corinthians:

*“No one can know a person’s thoughts except that person’s own spirit, and no one can know God’s thoughts except God’s own Spirit.” 1 Corinthians 2:11 NLT*

*Or the rhetorical question Paul poses on Romans 11: “For who has known the mind of the Lord? Who knows enough to give Him advice?” Romans 11:34 NLT*

So, we’ve been invited in, by God, to know God, but we’ve also been warned that we’ll never fully understand Him, His mind, or His ways. In fact, one of THE ONLY things I find in Scripture that we’re promised is that we’ll fully know and understand is God’s plan and hope for our lives.

*We ask God to give you COMPLETE knowledge of His will and to give you spiritual wisdom and understanding. Then the way you live will always honor and please the Lord, and your lives will produce every kind of good fruit. All the while, you will grow as you learn to know God better and better. Colossians 1:9-10 NLT*

What a beautiful set up. God promises us that we can fully know ourselves, who He’s called us to be, and why we’re here; while simultaneously promising that we’ll never understand the depth and beauty of who He is, how He works and why He does such wonderful things for us.

If we had a malicious, tyrannical God, He would’ve set it up that we fully understand EVERYTHING about Him, but that we don’t ever have a chance of understanding who we are or why we’re here. What a nightmare that would be! Thank God for God, and His lovingkindness with how things work. Mystery is not something that can’t be known, it is something that can be endlessly known.

This past Sunday, my daughter was playing with our dog’s leash. She was running around the house using it like a Sheriff Callie lasso, and it was fun for her until... It got tangled. It got all twisted up in knots, and just as I was going to step in and help her, I saw her little eyes light up with intrigue. She saw the challenge ahead of figuring out how to un-tie this thing.

So she sat down in the corner of our couch, and quietly, for 5 minutes or so, she worked at this thing, until finally she stood up, so proud of herself, with the leash completely untangled. It was an accomplishment.

And then... She asked me to tie it back up in a different way. *“Make it really hard, lots of knots!”* she said. And I did. And she worked at it quietly and untied it. And again, and again. This became an activity for her for the better part of a half-hour.

What is it about the human mind that wants to untangle everything and fully figure everything out? We’ve got Rubik’s cubes, riddles, puzzles—we even have Escape Rooms. (Have you heard

of these things? They're these physical adventure games, where you and your friends are locked in a room and have to use the elements in the room to solve a series of puzzles and escape within a set time limit. Some of you are getting anxious just thinking about it, but some of my friends LOVE these things. My friend Justin has done 6 or 7 of these things. My parents did one up in Portland this past year.)

We are wired to unravel mysteries. To solve problems. To answer questions. So we're taking our first step in unraveling today.

If you haven't spent much of your Christian life investigating the Trinity, you're in good company. In fact, there are some 17 centuries between 4th-century Cappadocia and the past decade where the Trinity went largely un-noticed.

Subtle references here and there, but no deep desire to learn what it could mean for us, and how it could influence our lives. Even if you've read your Bible cover to cover, guess what word you won't find? TRINITY. It's not in the Bible. In fact, there are a few important words in the Christian faith not found in the Bible... One of those being the word: Bible. Nowhere in Scripture.

So the word Trinity is absent, but the concept isn't.

*"Therefore go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name (singular) of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit." Matthew 28:19 NLT*

The Great Commission, very clearly referencing one God with three distinct manifestations.

*"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." 2 Corinthians 13:14 NLT*

The Apostle Paul, clearly referencing three dimensions of God to be recognized and embraced. And today's specific text, from Ephesians 2:

*"Together as one body, Christ reconciled both groups to God by means of his death on the cross, and our hostility toward each other was put to death. He brought this Good News of peace to you Gentiles who were far away from Him, and peace to the Jews who were near. Now all of us can come to the Father through the same Holy Spirit because of what Christ has done for us. So now you Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens along with all of God's holy people. You are members of God's family. Together, we are His house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself. We are carefully joined together in Him, becoming a holy temple for the Lord. Through him, you Gentiles are also being made part of this dwelling where God lives by His Spirit." Ephesians 2:16-22 NLT*

Ok, so who here was NOT raised Jewish? K, all of us are Gentiles. In this passage, when Paul is announcing this incredible message of unity and connection, we're the outsiders he's describing. It's hard for us to fully understand this today.

This statement that Paul is making is quite radical and provocative, especially to a Jewish audience—people that have been told their entire lives that **THEY** are the chosen ones, and everyone else is not.

So, at the risk of this being lost on us, as Americans, picture in your mind some sort of people group you've spent most of your life looking down on. Grab your nearest stereotype or racist thought. Don't pretend that you don't have any. We've all got them, buried down in our psyche. Some ugly thought from our childhood or some racist thing our grandparents or drunk uncle taught us.

Imagine the people that you understand the least, the people that might even scare you, in your mind. Might be:

- *Rich, white men*
- *People from the LGBT community*
- *Muslims*
- *Syrian refugees*
- *Powerful, intelligent women in leadership*
- *Members of ISIS*
- *Members of the Klu Klux Klan*
- *People from gangs or tribes or cultures that we've never connected with...*

Now imagine your father, one evening just before dinner, walking into the room with his arm around one of these people and saying, *"Hey everyone, I want you to know that I just adopted this person, and they're part of our family now."*

Every racist, stereotypic thought in your mind would be challenged to the Nth degree. That's what's happening here with Paul writing to the church in Ephesus. People OUTSIDE of the family were being welcomed in. And not only that, they're being given equal roles, and equal access to God. *"Together as one body, Christ reconciled both groups to God by means of his death on the cross, and our hostility toward each other was put to death."*

This is provocative, progressive stuff. If you think the Bible is too traditional or irrelevant, read it through the eyes of a 1st-century audience. The teachings in scripture are ANYTHING but traditional or predictable. They challenge every social, cultural norm that was known by that audience.

So, as a Church, we're united. We're family. Black, white, gay, straight, Asian, Hispanic, male and female, transgender, poor, wealthy, Democrats and Republicans, AND yes, even Libertarian! And people who are still feeling the Bern! We're family.

Great... Love that. Unity is a good thing. But what we are united in? And if we're united, we better try to understand what is uniting us, and to put language around it, so we can be speaking the same language.

That's one of the primary things that defines a family or a tribe, is common language.

What do we mean when we say “God the Father” or “Jesus Christ” or “the Holy Spirit”? My goal, for the next few minutes, is to hang language and illustration on these three distinctions, with the hope that at the end, we better understand who God is, and who we’re called to be in response.

A few weeks ago, as I was driving to get lunch with a friend, a connection struck me, and it was so vivid that I had to pull over and ask Siri to take down a note in my phone. It said this: “Trinity; God as the source of life and living fully. Jesus as the source of love and loving deeply. Spirit as the source of generosity and giving freely.”

It struck me that the language we’ve been using here all along might just be a key (not THE key) to unlocking this great Mystery of our faith.

How are we to understand and interact with The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit? Through the lens (at least for our church community) of living fully, loving deeply, and giving freely.

Is this all encompassing and a full and final definition of the Trinity? No, but nothing ever will be. I believe that by looking at these three distinct aspects of God through the framework of our values at Harbor, we will do a better job of living in a Trinitarian way.

## **GOD: The Father.**

The Source of everything living. The Creator of creation itself. The Maker of the Heavens, and the Maker of our molecules. Who better to teach us about LIFE; and LIFE TO THE FULL?

Now, it’s important with each of these parts of God, for us to confront the inaccurate images we have embedded within us. When I say “God”, what do you see? Do you see a loving father? Or do you actually see a distant, angry, judgmental King, sitting on a throne?

- What image of God were you given growing up?
- And how have your life experiences shaped how you view Him?
- Are you afraid of God?
- When people talk about “judgment day,” does that terrify you?

What if, instead of viewing God as some distant, eternal Threatener, we viewed God as the Ultimate Participant, in both the good and the painful? What if, instead of being removed, we viewed God as completely here. Today. This very moment.

How about viewing God as the LIFE FORCE of everything? The spark inside every single cell in your body.

The implications of this paradigm shift are staggering:

- every healthy impulse,
- every step toward the future,

- every creative thought,
- every act of love,
- every movement toward beauty,
- every interest in truth,
- every bit of ambition for humanity and the earth, for wholeness and holiness, is the eternally-flowing life of God, the Father.

This might feel like some sort of hippie, New-Agey belief, but it's not. It's 1 John 4:8 NLT, "God is love, man..." What's more hippie than that?

This new understanding of God the Father allows us (and inspires us) to live with God everywhere and all the time. This not just a Sunday morning thing.

Fr. Richard Rohr writes,

*"In the budding of a plant, the smile of a gardener, the excitement of a teenage boy over his new girlfriend, the tireless determination of a research scientist, the pride of a mechanic over his hidden work under the hood, the loving nuzzling of horses, the tenderness with which eagles feed their chicks, and the downward flow of every mountain stream... In the chirp of every bird excited about a new morning, in the hard beauty of every sandstone cliff, in the deep satisfaction at every job well done, in the passion of sex, and even in a smile to a department store worker..."*

*"The world, life and death, the present and the future... Everything belongs to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God." 1 Corinthians 3:22-23 NLT*

Unless we begin to see God the Father as involved in every part of life that is beautiful, good, active and inspiring, there's no chance our lives will be marked by life to the full. Images of God as a judge in a courtroom handing out convictions and punishments will never inspire us to live fully.

God is in the process of saving the world, even if we fail to notice it.

- Or fail to enjoy it.
- Or fail to share it with others.
- Or fail to fully live our only life.

We will become as large-minded or as small-minded as the God we worship.

Who is God the Father? He is LIFE... The source of living fully, and we understand Him by embracing the very life He gives to us.

**THE SON: Jesus Christ.**

A mentor of mine used to remark that most people are comfortable in talking about God, but that the moment you mention the name “Jesus Christ,” the very air in the room comes to a standstill. As if our souls know something our brains don’t.

Jesus Christ. The Son.

The One that redefined everything for us.

The One that showed us that it’s possible to love our enemies.

The One that rejected us trying to make him king, only to reveal to us that His Kingdom was so much more than we ever imagined.

The most unexpected, confusing, yet liberating person in all of history, that continues to challenge us to this day.

Jesus.

We have God the Father, inviting us to life and life to the full, but that as an end in itself CAN become self-serving. We can find ways to manipulate that for our own gains, with our unhealthy egos and putting ourselves above others... “*God wants me to live fully?! All right! I’m going to go rob a bank, buy some drugs, sleep around... Life’s a party!*”

This is where Jesus enters the story. Life, apart from love, is not life at all. Living purely on instinct or primal urges will never truly satisfy us.

Jesus calls us to love. And not only that, He demonstrates what that love should look like.

*“This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you. There is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” John 15:12-13 NLT*

Could Jesus be calling us to physically die for one another? Perhaps. And for my roommate in college that’s a Navy SEAL, that’s a reality facing him every day.

But just as likely, Jesus is calling us to live with self-sacrificial love. A love that puts others before ourselves. A love that is free from self-serving motivation. A love that is QUITE contrary to the capitalistic “*anything-to-get-ahead*” mentality we celebrate in America.

What would it look like for you, today, to live with self-sacrificial love towards the people around you?

- What would it mean for the way you spend your time?
- What would it mean for how you spend your money?
- How would it affect you?
- What would it look like for you to look at the people around you, and SEE the people around you, not as hindrances to our secret, personal agendas, but as our agenda itself?

What if the people that “get in the way” of our dreams are actually the dream God wants us pursuing? Again, not with a self-serving goal of “converting” or “convincing”... But of loving.

Jesus never required people to “pray the prayer” or commit to a certain set of beliefs before healing them. He simply asked them, *“Do you want to get well?”*

There’s no moral test. There’s no checking out if they’re Jewish, gay, baptized or still in their first marriage. There is only one question, *“Do you want to get well?”* And if the person responds vulnerably, trusting Him... The person is healed. Simple as that.

What if we set aside our agendas, our little “us and them” boundaries and allowed the Jesus within us to love the people around us in practical ways? ... What if?

Here’s what’s at stake:

The people around us NEVER experiencing the love of God in a real way.

We can talk about love until we’re blue in the face, but it will NEVER become real to people around us until they experience someone showing them love when they least deserve it... In a self-sacrificial way.

Are you willing to become someone’s living definition of Jesus’ love? That’s no small task, but it’s a privilege that each of us as believers can embrace. They will look at the way you treated them and think, *“If this is how this person loved me, as flawed as they are, their God must be incredible.”*

Who is the Son? Jesus, our living example of self-sacrificial love... Calling us to love deeply, no matter the circumstance.

And finally...

## THE SPIRIT: The Holy Spirit.

Perhaps the hardest for us to consider, because of its’ intangibility.

How many of us have lost loved ones? And how many of you would say that you were profoundly impacted by that person’s life? And it’s as if the person is almost still with you in a way... Their memory is so tangible and their impact on your life was so significant, that it’s as if you’re carrying around, within you, their... spirit... with how you’re living day-to-day. You’ll never forget them. They cross your mind daily. In the big and the little things.

I would propose, on the very basic, humanist, secular level, removing all elements of the miraculous and supernatural (which I believe in, of course), that this is what it’s like to live with the Spirit of God within us. A force, beyond ourselves, that influences us, reminds us, guides us, all in strict accordance with what we’ve seen lived out in Jesus, and the character we see of God.

But here’s the thing: The Spirit of God is not just a memory... The Spirit of God is alive, and constantly on the move. So not only does the Spirit remind us how Jesus lived and the example He was in His 1st-century context, we’re being drawn forward and given new inspiration for how to live like Jesus in 2017.

*“In his grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well. So if God has given you the ability to prophesy, speak out with as much faith as God has given you. If your gift is serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, teach well. If your gift is to encourage others, be encouraging. If it is giving, give generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly.” Romans 12:6-8 NLT*

It’s very difficult to give away things that we’ve worked hard for. Our egos buck against it. It’s counter to our inherited nature. If we earned it? It’s ours. But what if we didn’t earn it?

The Greek word for “gifts” in Romans 8 is *charismata*, which literally means gift that flows from God to humans.

The Spirit gives us gifts. Gifts that we don’t deserve. Gifts that we didn’t earn. GIFTS!

What kind of gifts? Our natural talents, our personalities, our passions... Those are all gifts.

For what reason? To change the world.

People that walk in-step with the Spirit never stop growing and changing and recognizing new opportunities to use their gifts for the benefit of others. When we’ve truly received grace, we can’t help but be THRILLED to share it with others.

To close here...

To live fully, we look at the world through the eyes of the Father. We see the beauty in every living thing. We don’t waste our days. We live in gratitude and wonder at the very breath that sustains us. The Father brings us life.

To love deeply, we look at each other through the eyes of the Son. We feel the burden to live outside of ourselves; with a self-sacrificial love... Jesus’ love flows through us.

To give freely, we look within ourselves through the eyes of the Spirit. We recognize the unique gifts we’ve been given; not as things to keep to ourselves, but as talents to bring out to the world. The generosity of God living in us...

Harbor, may we press into the great mystery of the Trinity, and live the lives we were designed to live.

With life, and love, and generosity.

Let’s pray...