

# A Love Triangle that Works

*A sermon for Trinity Sunday by Nathan Nettleton, 22 May 2016*

© [LaughingBird.net](http://LaughingBird.net)

## Message

The self-giving love of the Trinity, contrasted with the experience of a toxic love triangle, calls us to a new non-possessive love that always seeks the glory and delight of the other.

## Sermon

There is a country heartbreak song that goes ["One and one and one is one too many."](#) I don't know if you've ever had the experience of being caught in a love triangle, but I have. I don't recall ever having two potential lovers competing for me, but there were a few times when I was one of two blokes competing for the affections of the same young woman. Actually, as I began to think about this, I realised that I'd had that experience rather more often than I really wanted to remember. And perhaps the reason I didn't like to remember is that I didn't too often emerge as the winner! Wherever you are in a love triangle, and however it works out, there is no denying that it is a very intense experience.

One of the main reasons that it is so intense is that there are two sets of very powerful emotions running in you at the same time, and both sets are heightened, perhaps even blown out of all proportion, by the nature of the triangle. Firstly you are experiencing very powerful feelings of love and desire for someone. And those feelings are heightened and even amplified by your awareness that someone else is similarly attracted to the same person. One of the fundamental quirks of human nature is that people and things become more desirable to us when we witness other people being attracted to them. That's why TV advertisements don't usually attempt to persuade you of the superior qualities and features of a product; they more often just show you how much other people desire and value it. It piques our interest and raises the value of the object in our estimation. I don't think this is only about humans. My dogs can frequently leave something lying around untouched for ages, but as soon as one picks it up, the other wants it too. And this same thing happens in our feelings for people. Every kid in the school yard wants to be best friends with the most popular kid. And plenty of men who have long taken their wives for granted and become rather cold and bored in their affections are suddenly roused to passion again if they think that another man is showing some interest in her. The love triangle dramatically inflates the perceived value of the one who is desired by the two.

But in such a situation, it is not only intense feelings for the beloved one that we experience. We also experience intense feelings towards the one who is competing for our beloved. These feelings, of course, are not at all positive. We view this person as an arch-rival, and probably as an unscrupulous, deceiving and hostile rival. We quickly convince ourselves that in contrast to the pure gift of our love, this rival could only offer heartbreak and misery to our beloved. We increasingly see the rival as the embodiment of evil and we imagine ourselves somehow cast in a great conflict between good and evil. This is the dark flip side of the way other people's desires influence us. If we both desire an exclusive relationship with the same person, we quickly set ourselves up as rivals, and the rivalry poisons our relationship. As the Apostle James says, "Those conflicts and disputes among you, ... do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts." I

think it is arguable that such desire-fuelled rivalry lies at the root of virtually all inter-personal sin.

And so, back to our scenario, we quickly have extraordinarily intense feelings running towards both other corners of the love triangle. In one direction we are overwhelmed with the desire to love and possess and cherish and savour. In the other, we are consumed by the desire to defeat and discredit and destroy. I remember going to embarrassingly extreme lengths to try to prove my love and discredit the intentions of my rivals. In the intensity of a love triangle, nothing seems too extreme or too embarrassing. Anything is possible. No wonder love triangles are such popular subject matter for literature, theatre, film, and TV. “One and one and one is one too many,” makes for a gripping plot-line.

In the church calendar, today is Trinity Sunday. It is a strange day for preachers, because it is the only special day in the calendar when what we are commemorating is not a story or an incident, but a doctrine. Pentecost, last Sunday, marked a particular event – the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the fledgling church. Christmas marked the birth of Jesus; Good Friday, his death; and Pascha, his resurrection. But today has no particular event in mind. Instead it focusses on a theological answer to a question about the nature of God. But the fact that it doesn’t commemorate an event, or a particular story, doesn’t mean that we can’t enter into the experience of it, or know something of its meaning through the stories of our own experience. And I want to suggest that there is something of the love triangle in the story of the Trinity.

You see, one of the things that most of the theologians agree on when considering what it means to describe God as a Trinity is that we are not so much talking about three individuals, but about three relationships. Three relationships that exist within the inner life of God. And three interconnected relationships is a relationship triangle. But these relationships within God don’t turn into poisonous and divisive rivalries, so in what way can I say that they are somehow akin to the love triangle? Well, in a sense, the God whom we call “Trinity of Love”, is the love triangle that works; the love triangle that shows us what is wrong with our love triangles.

Listen to some of the lines from today’s readings. In Proverbs, we heard the Holy Spirit, portrayed as Lady Wisdom, singing, “When the Creator marked out the foundations of the earth, I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.” In Paul’s letter to the Romans we heard that “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and ... God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” And in the gospel according to John we heard “When the Spirit of truth comes, ... she will not speak on her own, but will speak whatever she hears. ... She will glorify me, because she will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine.”

What we have here are a trinity of love relationships that are extravagantly self-giving. Rather than becoming rivals of one another, they delight in one another and strive to glorify one another. There seems to be no limit to their willingness to give themselves to one another, and to give themselves to the strengthening of the other relationship, the precise relationship that we seek to destroy in our poisonous love triangles. It is not that there is no imitation of desire in this Trinity. There is. You can hear that even in these passages where one is said to

speaking the words of the other and to take what comes from one and to declare it to others. You can hear it even more explicitly in other passages where Jesus speaks of willing only what the Father wills and being one with the Father. Similarly, Paul urges us to imitate Christ in his perfect imitation of the Father so that our will becomes one with Christ's will; our desire one with Christ's desire. There is the same imitation of another's desire, but here it is an imitation that seeks only the glory of the other and does not create a poisonous rivalry.

So the more we contemplate the love triangle of the Trinity, the more we see God's call to us to be like God and to love in ways which are not possessive and aggressive; to love in ways that do not seek the exclusion of the other or the glorification of ourselves. The more fully we imitate the self-giving love of the Trinity, the more we will be set free from the rivalries that poison our desires and mire us in sin. This is not, by the way, an argument for multi-partner open marriage, because in a way that I don't have the time to unpack here, the sexual exclusivity of marriage, when not mutated by rivalry and possessiveness, actually frees us to love in more open and self-giving ways in the rest of our life. But although it is not an argument for abandoning the exclusivity of marriage, it is certainly a challenge to those possessive and controlling or clingy marriages that are characterised by a distrust that seeks to prevent any sort of intimate friendship with others lest they become sexualised love triangles.

But the beautiful and extravagantly self-giving love triangle of the Trinity is not only a model for us to imitate. It is also an invitation. Because just as these three relationships can allow other relationships and even celebrate them and glory in them, so too they eagerly look to draw others, namely us, into the life of that triangle of relationships. God is not a closed system, an exclusive love bond that has nothing to offer to those outside. On the contrary, God is intensely and overflowingly relational, and longs to draw us into that. The heart of the revelation of the nature of God is Christ's self-offering on the cross, where Jesus, having been falsely cast as a rival, gives up his life still loving, rather than reciprocate the hostility, and thus reveals to us the nature of God's self-giving love and the invitation into that love. And that's where we stand at this table, as witnesses of that act of self-giving, as recipients of that extravagant offer, as the Trinity of Love reaches out to us and places the body of Christ into our hands. And so here again, we are faced with the call and the invitation. We can denounce Christ as a rival and grasp at everything we desire, seeking to possess and control, and gratify ourselves, or we can let go, and accept the invitation and be carried by the Spirit into the love dance of the Trinity. Here and now we are invited into the one love Triangle that really works!

*I got the idea for this sermon from Paul Nuechterlein's [Girardian Lectionary](#) website*