Several years ago a student of mine was visiting churches in the vicinity of the college. After a few Sunday mornings at a particular church, he mentioned to some members of the congregation that he did not feel he understood the doctrine of the Trinity. When he returned the next week after the service some members of the consistory approached him. They advised him that he was welcome to attend for a few more weeks but if by then he still did not understand the Trinity, he should look for another place to worship. That—no surprise—was his last day at that church.

The episode reminds me of the *Far Side* cartoon in which two scientists stand by a blackboard covered with equations. Beside them, there’s a dog looking up at it. One scientist says, “Ohhhh…dogs are so cute when they try to comprehend quantum mechanics.” I have no idea what the people at that church thought they understand, but I’ll say up front that none of us, no human being, no theologian, no philosopher, understands what we confess when we say we believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit, three persons in one God. Yet this does not mean that this is unimportant, of no great practical consequence, and that the Trinitarian confession is some sort of abstract, abstruse theological matter we can safely put on the shelf and go about our business of following Jesus. As G. K. Chesterton once said, if you want a simple religion of love, you’ll have to look for it in the Athanasian Creed (*The Everlasting Man*, Part Two, Chapter 4.)
That God is triune is one of the two things we Christians say about God which are hard to
swallow. The other is that God somehow was humanly, literally present with us as Jesus of
Nazareth. As it happens, the two are intimately related. N. T. Wright points out, “When people
ask, ‘Was Jesus God?’ they usually think they know what the word God means and are asking
whether we can fit Jesus into that” (The Meaning of Jesus, p. 157). But this gets things
backwards. Our only clear view of what God is like is what we see when we see Jesus. The true
God, over against all the gods of the human imagination, is the God who reveals himself in
Jesus. What is this God like?

I was once in a graduate theology seminar where we were discussing the intricacies of “process
theology.” Frustrated with what was in my youthful and ungenerous estimation the theologians’
hapless foray into philosophy, I objected that this made of God a kind of metaphysical
contraption so, even if this stuff were all true, why should anyone care about this God who could
not possibly care about me? I remember this mainly because the professor, a distinguished old
gentleman, had to translate “contraption” for the benefit of the German student in the class.
Now, someone might think pretty much the same thing about the traditional idea of the Trinity,
but it is crucially different. It makes explicit the conviction that God does care about us. It
fleshes out the meaning of the claim that God is love. The radical Christian claim is not that God
loves us, in the sense that loving is one of the things, among others, that God does, and thus
something that he might do, or not do, as he sees fit. God does not love in the way that Spot
runs. A stationary Spot is a possibility. But for God to be is for love to be. God is a communion
of loving persons. To be for and with the other is God’s very nature. As deep into God as we
can go, as deep into reality as we can go, it’s love that we’ll find. Love is the most real thing.
This reaching out to what is other to be one with it, creating unity in difference, is not an add-on,
not contingent, not justified by, or explained, by something else. It’s what explains everything else. Rock bottom.

This God who is love is the God who creates. Love is free, so we won’t say that this triune God had to create. He had no need creatures could satisfy. He was not lonely and in need of companionship. He was not bored and looking for entertainment. He had no compulsion to demonstrate his wisdom or power to anyone. He had no desire to be in control of anyone. The everlasting life of Father, Son, and Spirit was joy itself, an eternal dance of giving and receiving complete and in need of nothing outside itself. Yet it makes perfect sense that such a God would freely choose to bring into being others to share in his love, to be loved and to be called to love in return. For this very good reason, says Christian theology, the worlds were created, and the likes of us came into existence: creatures invited by their creator to share in his triune life.

As those beautiful closing verses in today’s reading from Proverbs tell us, God rejoices in his creation; he delights in the human race. God delights in the human race? Did he miss the twentieth century? Has he read a newspaper lately? Has he seen America’s Got Talent?! I don’t delight in the human race, and I’m one of them. But God delights in us. He rejoices in the fact that we exist. This is not the language of disinterested evaluation of the creature’s merits. This is not the attitude of someone who approves or disapproves of us, depending on how we perform, of how we meet expectations and satisfy someone’s need. It’s the language of love: happiness simply because someone exists.

There’s a long history in Christian theology of trying to understand God by way of abstract metaphysical concepts. There is, I’m sure, something to be said for this. It’s sometimes called “perfect being theology.” Yet perfect being theology makes it very hard to acknowledge that
God can respond to his creatures, that he can feel anything, joy or pain, that he takes risks, or makes himself vulnerable in any way. It makes it very hard to make any sense of the idea that God is love and that he reaches out to us in love. I think, instead, that our best hope of making sense of the God who is himself a fellowship of loving persons lies in our experience of love between human persons, limited and ambiguous as it always is. In the movie *Sweet Land*, it’s 1920 on the Minnesota prairie. Olaf Torvik is a Norwegian bachelor farmer, but relatives back in Norway have arranged to send a young woman, sight unseen, to be his bride. Olaf does not know what he’s in for. His relatives have told him nothing about the girl, about what she looks like, about what she’s like. But he wants a wife. Inge at last arrives at the train station, shy, with barely a word of English, but ready to marry the equally diffident man who’s there to pick her up. They proceed directly to the church where the Lutheran minister and congregation await, ready for the wedding. They stand at the altar, ready to take their vows, when the awful truth is revealed. Inge is not Norwegian. She is German. The patriotic Norwegian-Americans, wary of being mistaken for the hated enemy, are horrified. We were just at war with the Germans! Olaf’s friend, the best man, points out that Martin Luther was German, but to no avail. The pastor refuses to marry them. Inge and Olaf try the County Court House. They just want to be married. The laws intended to keep out German saboteurs and spies are still in force, and the officious clerk refuses to issue a marriage license unless Inge presents a birth certificate which she doesn’t have: it was destroyed in the same bombing raid that killed her parents back in Germany. She must send to Europe for papers to prove she is who she says she is. The wait begins, but what to do with Inge? For a few weeks she stays with Olaf’s neighbors, but eventually their farm is foreclosed on and they are evicted. She has nowhere to go. What can Olaf do? He cannot marry her and he cannot send her away. She moves into Olaf’s house. She
sleeps in the house; he sleeps in the barn, but the community is scandalized. They are living in sin! Months go by and still no documents from Europe and no wedding. They are ostracized. They cannot rent a combine to harvest Olaf’s corn, so he and Inge do the backbreaking work by hand. Through all of this they are falling in love. Olaf is changing from seeing Inge with suspicion, disappointment, and frustration to delight in her. To hell with the neighbors and the law and the church. Olaf moves out of the barn. The improprieties and the liabilities don’t count. For now, you see, Olaf loves her; she is now his wife, no matter what anyone thinks about it. The documents never materialize. There is no wedding. And so they live and love on the farm for the next fifty years.

Even in this romanticized work of fiction, Olaf’s love for Inge is not totally selfless. The story is based on his need for a wife. He’s a lonely bachelor farmer seeking a helpmeet and companion. Our loves are necessarily and properly always to some degree self-interested and conditional. If, after a few winters in Minnesota, Inge had left Olaf, gone back to Germany, and eventually become a Nazi, his love for her might well have waned, rather than deepening and maturing over the years as it did in the story. Our loves are at best images that point toward the completely free love God has for us. Only God’s love cannot be defeated by disloyalty or indifference. Henri Nouwen writes, “The whole story of creation, incarnation and our incorporation into the fellowship of Christ’s body tells us that God desires us as if we were God, as if we were that unconditional response to God’s giving that God’s self makes in the life of the Trinity.”

What could we possibly do in response to such a gift? Not that there’s anything we could possibly do to make ourselves worthy of it, but we can ask what makes sense in light of it. It’s a minority view, but I find compelling the logic that says God always intended to become incarnate, to become a part of his creation, to communicate himself in bone and blood and flesh
to his creatures, to be with us and share our lives as one of us. Others think God becomes incarnate only as a response to things going wrong, to save us, but in any event, we know that God does not remain remote and uninvolved. He makes himself tangibly present, making himself available where there is need, even where that means being misunderstood, rejected, hurt or worse. We say yes to God’s love when, whatever our individual flaws and fears, we give Jesus flesh in this world. That’s what makes sense in response to who God is and what he does. The question is not whether we can explain the Trinity, but whether we can explain our lives as a response to the triune God’s call to share in his life and work.

Amen.