

God in Three Persons

One morning early this week Carol Bennett knocked on my office door and asked, as she often does, about changing the parament hanging from the pulpit. She reminded me that this Sunday is Trinity Sunday on the church calendar and that the color for this week should be white. After a moment's thought I told Carol that I didn't think I would have much to say about Trinity Sunday, and we agreed to put up the multi-seasonal parament you see here instead. But then as the week progressed and I began planning in earnest for today's service, I decided that a little bit of Trinity Sunday might be a good thing after all. So, here we are ...

Trinity Sunday falls on this particular Sunday, right after Pentecost, as a way of summing up the annual journey of the church year that begins on the first Sunday of Advent, and traces God's mighty acts of salvation through the life, and death, and resurrection of Jesus, and reaches its climax with the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. But our belief in God as Trinity is something that is with us every Sunday in the language of our worship. As we rejoice in God's forgiveness of our sins, we sing "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and the Holy Ghost." As we present our offerings to God we bring them singing, "Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost." We baptize as Jesus taught us, "in

the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” And we are sent forth with Paul’s Trinitarian words of blessing from 2 Corinthians.

But even though the language of the Trinity is constantly with us, it’s not something we intentionally talk about all that often. In fact, for many this whole idea of God being both three and one is more of trouble than it’s worth. It might be fair to say, to take some words 1 Corinthians completely out of context, the Trinity is “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks.”

It’s funny the little things that stand out in a person’s memory, but I have a very distinct memory of my sixth grade teacher, Mrs. Manter, writing on the blackboard one day that we would be learning about the world’s “three great monotheistic religions” born in the Middle East—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. I think I may remember it because that was such a big word for sixth grader!

We may share with Jew and Muslims a belief that God is one, but our Christian belief in one God *in three persons* has always been a stumbling block in our attempts to find common ground with them. When they say that God is one, that’s it. And despite Christians’ valiant efforts, our neighbors of those faiths often come away from interfaith conversations still thinking that we really do believe in three gods, not one—in other words that we’re not really monotheists at all.

Our belief in a triune God can also be foolishness to “Greeks.” Especially since the time of the Enlightenment, philosophically-minded folks have found our belief in the Trinity to be too complicated to be worth the trouble. In those

days Sir Isaac Newton has just discovered three simple laws of motion; astronomers were discovering that the planets move along elegant geometric curves. Compared to how logical the universe appears to be, explaining the intricacies of a three-in-one God is enough to make even the most intelligent person's eyes glaze over.

I once ran across a list of best-selling books that that people bought but never actually read. The top book on the list was Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*. It wasn't read because, ironically, it turns out that reality is a lot more complicated and mysterious than Newton imagined, and the math required to describe it is enough to boggle the minds of all but a few. So maybe there is a place for a God whose nature defies simple logic!

The challenges of believing in a three-in-one God will always be with us. And so for the rest of our time I'd like to ask two questions. I won't be able to do more than scratch the surface of either, but I can hopefully point us in a helpful direction. Those questions are: (1) Why do Christians believe that God is a Trinity? (2) What difference does it make? As it turns out we're really only going to get to the first one this week, and we'll have to come back for the second one—which is maybe the more important one—next time.

To answer the first question, we obviously need to begin with the Bible. "Trinity" is not a biblical word, and the classic formulation of the Trinity didn't come until the Council of Nicaea about 300 years after Jesus. But its roots are planted deeply in Scripture itself. And we need to remember that the Bible isn't

the same as a book of theology or Christian doctrine that you would pick up in a library. It's a library in it's own right—a collection of writings that tell the story of God's relationship with the people of Israel and the church, that includes collections of laws, and sayings of prophets, letters written to churches, and expressions of very personal relationships with God. There no part of it that sets out a system of teachings like a seminary student would study in a theology class.

But maybe the most important insight we gain from a survey of the Bible is that Christians began talking about God as three-in-one and one-in-three because that's how the very first Christian believers *experienced* God. We can see this scattered throughout the pages of the New Testament, but we can see illustrated especially well in the gospel of John, and especially in Jesus' own way of speaking about himself, and the Father, and the Holy Spirit.

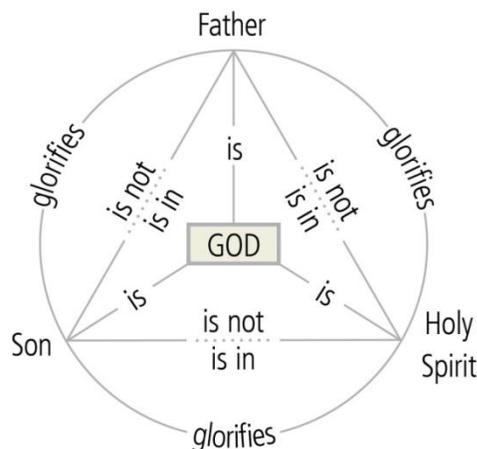
On the one hand, Jesus seems to have no trouble making a distinction between himself and the Father and the Holy Spirit. As we saw in the gospel reading just a couple of weeks ago Jesus prayed to the Father. He could say things like this in John 14: "I will ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate [the Holy Spirit] to be with you ... [and] in you." (John 14:16-17)

But on the other hand, there's so much overlap between what Jesus and the Father and the Spirit do, that as you read John it can become almost impossible to sort it out. In fact, I think that's why I often find John a very frustrating book to read. Just one little example: Anybody who knows the Bible

knows the 23rd Psalm and so we know that the Lord is our shepherd. But Jesus comes along in John and he says, “I am the good shepherd” (John 11:11). And although he doesn’t use the word, when Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit he says that the Spirit will “be with you forever” and “abides with you” and “will be in you.” In other words, the Holy Spirit is a lot like a shepherd, too.

And these distinctions are visible not just in John, but all over the New Testament. We never speak of God the Father dying on the cross, or of Jesus descending upon the church on the day of Pentecost, or of the Holy Spirit being born of the Virgin Mary. But we would also say that all three were present and active in the creation of the universe and in the birth of Jesus. And very early in the church’s life we find believers linking them together in expressions like the ones we’ve read from Matthew and 2 Corinthians. And we continue to experience God in *our* lives in these ways today.

As time went on and Christian thinkers arose who began thinking in more systematic ways, they began trying to find ways to talk about God that honor Christian experience and the witness of Scripture. How could they express both the unity of the one God and the distinctiveness of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? This diagram tries to map out all the complicated connections that this leads us to:



But how could they find language to express what is beyond the limits of language and logic?

We know how hard this is just from our attempts to find analogies to explain it to ourselves or to our children. We say God is like an egg with a shell and egg white and a yolk, or St. Patrick talked about the one shamrock with its three leaves. But these put too much emphasis on the threeness of God. We say that God is like the three phases of water—solid, liquid, and gas—but that puts too much emphasis on the oneness.

The early church theologians used the tools they had in their toolboxes—concepts drawn from Scripture, but also from Greek and Roman philosophy—and came to the language enshrined in the Nicene Creed. We don't often use the Nicene Creed in worship, and so I'd like to invite you to listen to it now:

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is,
seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
and became truly human.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.

On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

It's impossible to forget 2,000 years of Christian experience and go back and start from scratch, but I sometimes wonder how we would say it if we could? Would we be able to find better words? Or should we simply give praise to God whom we encounter as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—one God in three persons, blessed Trinity? Amen.

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June 11, 2017*