

Getting Our Arms around the Trinity

John 3:1-17

(3:1) Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. (2) This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." (3) Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." (4) Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" (5) Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. (6) That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. (7) Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' (8) The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

(9) Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" (10) Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? (11) Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. (12) If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? (13) No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. (14) And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, (15) that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

(16) "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (17) For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (18) Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. (19) And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. (20) For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. (21) But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been carried out in God."

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, we have a peculiar confluence of texts on this particular Sunday on which we examine a uniquely Christian concept, one that baffles theologians and laymen alike and certainly befuddles the world. However, I will say more about that in a minute. Prior to tying our brains in knots, let us limber our minds by engaging in some mental stretching. I have a little quiz for you. Are you ready?

Consider the following situations and apply the proper term to each:

1. You are traveling in your car on a back road in the American southeast, listening to a radio crackling with static. A song plays that prominently features an

instrument stroked with a bow. Is the instrument a violin or a fiddle and is the music blue grass or country

2. You take a seat at a bar and order a beer. The barkeep brings you a dark, amber-colored elixir with a bitter and nutty taste. Are you drinking lager, ale, or pilsner?

3. You are at the mall and you have been driving around in circles searching for a parking spot and as you prepare to pull into one, suddenly some guy in a BMW swings into **your** space from the opposite direction. You hammer your horn and prepare to yell something. Should you call him an idiot or a moron? Are you suffering from IED, intermittent explosive disorder, or are you justified in your anger?

Splitting hairs, you say. It's all six of one or half a dozen of the other. Not so fast. Let's see how you have done.

Answers:

1. It's the same instrument at a symphony or a hoedown, but if the devil goes down to Georgia with one, it's called a fiddle. And if you hear more mandolin, fiddle and banjo than guitar, bass and drums, you can call it bluegrass.

2. The dark, nutty flavor indicates you are drinking ale, but only a beer snob really cares (and you will not find many of those, truth be told).

3. Banging your horn and yelling probably is not a good idea, but simply call out "Hey!" If the guy in the Beemer answers with intelligible words, he's a moron (IQ between 51 and 70). If the guy merely says "Hunh" or gestures, then you can correctly assume he is an idiot (IQ between 0 and 24). If this is not the first time you have suffered from an irrepressible bout of anger and it occurs on a fairly regular basis, then you may be suffering from intermittent explosive disorder. Otherwise, the driver of the Beemer is an inconsiderate jerk.

Understanding and using the proper terminology is supposed to be a sign of superior breeding, higher intellect, and an excellent education. Consequently, you may want to retake this quiz and study other nuances of our language.

Knowing subtle, yet important differences, is key in church as well, whether it be in the parking lot (where, we hope, more life-affirming names are shouted) or in the sanctuary itself where words like *Trinity* can evoke some serious head-scratching. Ask someone the difference between the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, or how one God can be three persons you are likely to receive some blank stares.

But here we are, Trinity Sunday, the first Sunday after Pentecost. Our readings present this concept even though none of them use the word Trinity, and for that matter, you will not find the word in the entire Bible. And why should a twenty-first century, post-modern Christian care? So what?

Good question! We describe ourselves as monotheistic – we believe in one God. That is the message of the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy (6:6-8), the passage known as the “Shema Israel.” “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” There are no others; don’t waste your time on what is not the true God. But we also affirm the deity of Christ and the Holy Spirit and a person frequently identified as “God the Father.” We find these references in the Epistle and Gospel for this morning. Peter speaking on the first Pentecost Acts chapter 2, verse 33, names all three persons. Our Gospel lesson from John 3 says we must be reborn again, from above by the Holy Spirit. And, God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son. There we have it; we believe in one God but we believe in three persons as well.

Sounds like three Gods, not one God. However, if one God, then it seems that we have – truly – an awesome God at work in the world today, one who invites us to be servants in the proclamation of the “good news.” We are called to proclaim that through Jesus we have been reconciled to God. We are forgiven! We are saved! We are loved!

Many have tried over the centuries to explain the concept of the Trinity when the Bible itself doesn’t lay it out with clear delineations and definitions. But maybe that is not the Bible’s failing; it is the failing of human language attempting to describe spiritual realities.

Many children learn in Sunday school that the Trinity is like water – H₂O – which can be a gas, a solid, or a liquid, and yet is always H₂O at the molecular level. Other children have heard about the egg with its shell, white and yoke, or about the federal government which has the executive, legislative and judicial branches yet remains one government. (Fortunately for us, the godhead does not fight with itself like the government.) On March 17 we talk about St. Patrick’s use of clover to illustrate the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, yet one clover. You can probably think about a lot more of these, all trying to explain the concept of one-in-three and three-in-one.

The mathematical approach is also attractive, the equilateral triangle being the most popular math symbol for the Trinity. And as one pastor has noted, $1 + 1 + 1 = 3$ doesn’t really work, $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$ works much better.

All these metaphors and explanations fall short, as will all comparisons of the spiritual with the created. We are left with little satisfaction by way of explanation. Despite our best efforts at explaining the Trinity, a full understanding seems to elude even those of us who have been life-long church members. If you want to have a lot of fun, try making sense of this for confirmation students when explaining the Apostle’s Creed. Church history itself, reveals a real struggle and often times acrimonious debate over the metaphysics of the whole thing.

But consider this: In our modernist desire to define all the terms correctly and to nail down precisely what we mean, maybe we have missed the entire idea altogether.

Trying to use definitive terms to describe God is like trying to nail *Jello* to the wall – eventually the whole thing falls apart.

Human language, even when it is inspired by God, has limitations when trying to define the spiritual. So maybe instead of putting our head in a spin about the nature of the Triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – maybe we should be focusing on the real essence of the Trinity – the power of relationships.

Paul’s letter to the Romans, chapter 8 does not attempt to provide a systematic theology of the Trinity, but, Paul sees God at work in a uniquely relational way, both within the godhead and with humans. You can approach the Trinity in two ways: either you can try to figure out which Person of God is coming and going and doing what and when, like trying to determine an airline schedule. Or, you can simply focus on the fact that God’s very nature, God’s being, God’s focus is internally and externally relational. Our connection with God is not supposed to be an intellectual exercise in upper level metaphysics, but a heartfelt relationship that is made real through the Spirit of God/Spirit of Christ/Holy Spirit “bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.”

Every once in a while, in attempt to get our finite brains around the idea of the Trinity we will say something like – the Father creates, the Son redeems and the Spirit sanctifies. However, take just the first one – the Father creates. If we read the opening chapter of Genesis we know that the Spirit hovered over the brooding chaos and the opening chapter of John informs us that nothing came into being without the Son’s involvement. Or how about the identification as the Son as the Savior? We know that God so loved the world that he sent his Son to redeem the world but none of us can turn to Jesus unless the Holy Spirit works in us to believe in it. Consequently, all three persons of the Trinity are involved in our salvation.

The power of relationships is a different view of God than we can get from a chart. Perhaps we have made too much of the distinctive shape of the triangle, which we most often see depicted with three hard sides. The thing is that triangles are not that common in the natural order of God’s creation. Think about it – where do you see such hard edges naturally occurring? Rocky mountains jutting upward, maybe some leaf shapes or the shapes of shells . . . anywhere else? We can make a case that triangles are, more often than not, human constructs and that our triangular, pyramid-based diagrams are just that – human attempts at divine definition.

There is a tree in Johannesburg South Africa, that stands in the yard of a Catholic retreat center. When viewed from a particular angle, one sees a singular tree with a very large trunk. From another angle, the tree appears as three distinct trees, down to the very roots. The tree was nicknamed *Trinity – the Three-in-One*. The area around the base of the tree became a meeting ground where community was experienced. There, around its trunks, the deep things of life were discussed. No matter where a person leans on the tree, he is supported. No matter where a person gazes upon it, it is beautiful. Three trunks, one tree, inseparable and unified at its base, drawing all into fellowship with one another.

The existence of this tree is a natural and compelling illustration of the existence of our triune God, a God who operates in community to create community. Whether calling out Father, Jesus, or Holy Ghost, it is the Three-in-One God, inseparable and unified, who responds to our every need. No matter what name or office you call out, God will bear you up. No matter where you look, you can see the beauty of what God is doing. God, the Creator; God, the Savior; God, the Spirit who empowers is luring us into loving relationships with God's self and with one another. It is so amazing! Look again; it is one tree down to its very roots.¹

The truth is, we will probably never understand the Trinity by trying to define it. Even Paul, to whom God revealed great things and deep mysteries, runs around the idea. The only way we can "get" the Trinity is to join the fellowship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To become united with them as Jesus says in his high priestly prayer (John 17).

C. S. Lewis in his book *Mere Christianity*, tries to describe the action of the Trinity in his description of a Christian at prayer. "What I mean is this" he writes. "An ordinary, simple Christian kneels down to say his prayers. He is trying to get in touch with God. But if he is a Christian he knows that what is prompting him to pray is also God: God, so to speak, inside him. But he also knows that all real knowledge of God comes through Christ, the Man who was God – that Christ is standing beside him, helping him to pray, praying for him. You see what is happening. God is the thing to which he is praying – the goal he is trying to reach. God is also the thing inside him which is pushing him on – the motive power. God is also the road or bridge along which he is being pushed toward that goal. The whole threefold life of the three-personal Being is actually going on in that ordinary act of prayer."

Today is Trinity Sunday, a day we think rarely about, once a year in fact. Unlike other holy days, this day does not commemorate an event in the life of Christ or the Church, rather it commemorates a doctrine. It has confused many, caused innumerable disputes, and led to serious misunderstandings. Perhaps, it is not best to fry our brains trying to comprehend how God can be one and yet three Persons. It defines a relationship within the Godhead and defines our relationship to God. Today let us celebrate three-in-one Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is a God who loved us at creation, who redeemed us from our sins, and makes us holy. We celebrate our wonderful, unfathomable triune God. Amen.

May the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Sola Dei Gloria!

¹ Marilyn E. Thornton