

As It Was, Is and Ever Shall Be.....

Don Lincoln

Psalm 8

Today is Trinity Sunday. God: 3-in-1, 1-in-3. It's the only day in the church liturgical year devoted to a church doctrine. Always the Sunday after Pentecost, it marks the beginning of the longest season of the church year that runs all the way to Christ the King Sunday, the Sunday before Advent.

It's a season known as "ordinary time" – which is funny, because the Trinity is anything but ordinary. We know the kinds of words we use when we are trying to put a label on Trinity – words like omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, immutable, impassable, and all those big words we never use for anything else – we use for this never fully describable, unfathomable depths of the triune God?

I heard of a man who came to church only once a year – not on Easter or Christmas – but on Trinity Sunday. He said he came on that Sunday just to hear the preacher try to explain the unexplainable.

The late Cardinal Cushing said that when he was a parish priest, he was summoned to a home to give last rites to a man who had collapsed. Following custom, he knelt by the man and asked, "Do you believe in the God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?" The man roused a little, opened one eye, and said "Here I am dying and you ask me a riddle?"¹

Is there anybody else out there who struggles to get the Trinity? Is there anybody out there for whom $3 = 1$, $1 = 3$ just doesn't compute? Anybody who doesn't have the triune God figured out? If so, here's good news:

Nobody. Gets. The Trinity. At least not fully. I've done pictures; I've used every metaphor you can imagine, like the H₂O metaphor – the Trinity is like ice or liquid or vapor – water in the three forms; the shamrock metaphor – the shamrock has three leaves but it's one shamrock; the apple metaphor – it's the skin, the meat, and the seeds; the egg metaphor; even a pizza metaphor. None really suffice.

Nobody gets the Trinity. Not fully. Not in any rational, reasoned sense, because God is not to be reasoned out. Here's what happens if you try to make the Trinity reasonable: you get the Athanasian Creed; an ancient creed of the church. It speaks basically about two things – the Trinity and Christ. Here's what happens when you make the Trinity reasonable:

"Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith. And the catholic faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; neither confounding the Persons; nor dividing the Essence. For there is one Person of the Father; another of the Son; and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one; the Glory equal, the Majesty coeternal. Such

as the Father is; such is the Son; and such is the Holy Ghost. The Father uncreated; the Son uncreated; and the Holy Ghost uncreated. The Father unlimited; the Son unlimited; and the Holy Ghost unlimited. The Father eternal; the Son eternal; and the Holy Ghost eternal.

And yet they are not three eternal; but one eternal. As also there are not three uncreated; nor three infinite, but one uncreated; and one infinite. So likewise the Father is Almighty; the Son Almighty; and the Holy Ghost Almighty. And yet they are not three Almighties; but one Almighty. So the Father is God; the Son is God; and the Holy Ghost is God. And yet they are not three Gods; but one God. So likewise the Father is Lord; the Son Lord; and the Holy Ghost Lord. And yet not three Lords; but one Lord....”

Can I stop now? Had enough? Got that? And that’s not even all of it!

Some people, of course, simply decide since they can’t make sense of the Trinity, they’ll do away with it. Ask your cousin the Unitarian, or your neighbor the Mormon who don’t affirm this Trinitarian idea. If you decide the Trinity has to make rational sense, then those are pretty much your only options: either silly metaphors and carefully ridiculous explanations, or you throw it out altogether.

Nobody. Gets. The Trinity. Not fully. Then again, if we did, it wouldn't be God. So, where did this doctrine come from? That part is easy.

The early Christians experienced God, like so many humans, as **beyond them**; “as Creator and power above all, that created this world and all its magnificence.” They recognized the fullness of God is beyond language, beyond knowledge, and beyond our experience.

But at the same time the early Christians experienced God as **beyond them**, they also experienced God as **with them**, “as present historically in the person of Jesus.” Jesus’ followers saw that Jesus embodied the ways of God so clearly in His life. And because of His Words – I and the Father are one – I shall return to the Father – no one comes to the Father, but by me – and because of His deeds – healing the blind, the lame, the possessed; and raising Lazarus – and most clearly because of His resurrection, this itinerant Jewish rabbi known as Jesus of Nazareth, became known by some as Jesus the Christ; the Messiah; God incarnate; God in the flesh; God with us.

And, at the same time the early Christians experienced God as **beyond them** and **with them**, they also experienced God as **within them**, “as present **within** their community.” A force that empowered them with language, confidence, communion, fellowship and sharing unlike any of them had ever experienced.

So, although there was a transcendent aspect of God that would always be **beyond** their experience, and even after Jesus was no longer physically **with them**, early Christians still experienced the immanence – the closeness – of God that is, as poet Brian Wren writes, “closer to them than breathing.” They called this aspect of God “the Holy Spirit.” And they remembered – this was the One – the companion – Jesus promised.

From these experiences arose a doctrine that was the early believers’ best attempt to **describe**, far more than it was an effort to **define**. God beyond me, God with me, God within me – the experience of God as Trinity.

The fact of the matter is, most of us come to the Doctrine of the Trinity from the wrong direction. We should try approaching the Trinity with a faculty other than reason. Like wonder. Like awe. Like appreciation for beauty.

Someone said to me this week, trying to explain the Trinity is like trying to sing from the Dictionary instead of the Hymn Book! Imagine how lovely worship would be if that's what we did!!

I love this quote on the front of the bulletin. "Understanding the Trinity is very difficult. It's like trying to figure out what colour the letter seven smells like."²

The older I get, I find, the more comfortable I am with mystery; with things I don't comprehend. The apostle Paul says, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. But then I put away childish ways and became a man."

Actually I think it comes around full circle because you know who deals with mystery best of all? KIDS! We tell them Jesus is here and they say, "Cool."

When I was a young pastor, I would have spent this sermon attempting an adequate doctrinal recitation of the nature of the Trinity through Christian history. But I am far more comfortable now saying it's just not really all that explainable. As my Amish friend would say, "I don't know how; it just is."

How can you live in this life and not grow in comfort with mystery? Think about it! From whence does the flamingo get its pink? What perfect combination of hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen and carbon not only makes a living body – just the right proportion, THIS is what you get – but it is a body that can feel something so intangible and yet so real as LOVE. Nitrogen? Carbon? Hydrogen? Oxygen? Feel love?

The older I get, the more comfortable I am with not explaining mystery, so much as celebrating it, living in wonder and awe of it, and rejoicing that I am – however insignificant – a player in this grand mystery of God's creation.

Which is why I chose the 8th Psalm from the lectionary texts for this Trinity Sunday. It's a text that hinted at this glorious sense of turning everything on its head. It's the text from one of the choir's favorite anthems, The Majesty and Glory of God's Name. This Psalm invites us to simply ask the awe-filled questions of creature to creator. Not the questions of a prosecuting attorney, but the inquiries of the beloved to his or her love.

Using the old language of Scripture, "When I look at Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars that You have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them; mortals that You care for them, O God? The text at the end, "When I gaze into thenight sky..." Anybody ever been in big sky country like Montana and been out in the dark at night? It's big – and awe inspiring! The doctrine of Trinity testifies to a mystery beyond human comprehension.

BUT.....“mystery” and “beyond comprehension” do not mean we know nothing. It simply means we don’t know it all. The doctrine itself arises from what we **do know**.

We meet God’s threefold love and threefold nature in the astonishing faithfulness of the Creator – the Holy One of Israel, the God of heaven and earth; **and**, in the costly grace given to us in Jesus Christ our Savior in His death and His resurrection; **and**, we meet God’s faithful love in the communion the Holy Spirit grants to us with one another.

God beyond us. God with us. God within us.

A colleague wrote about this week; “I think there’s something about threes....”

*We read *The Three Little Pigs, Three Billy Goats Gruff, Goldilocks and the Three Bears* before we eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner, with a knife, fork, and spoon. We hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil despite the fact that we are threatened by lions, tigers, and bears. We play rock, paper, scissors, and we enter into life lock, stock, and barrel. Our goals are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and we count on the judicial, legislative, and executive branches of our red, white and blue government to assist us in this pursuit, yesterday, today, and tomorrow, because we cherish our government of the people, by the people, and for the people. We live a hop, skip, and a jump from snap, crackle, and pop. Our journey of life has a beginning, a middle, and an end. On the journey we encounter lights that may be red, yellow, or green. Our motto, for the past, the present, and the future is Ready, Set, Go!³*

So what’s the big deal with Father, Son and Holy Ghost?

“Mystery” is not the intellectual copout – but the intelligent embrace of creatures like you and me, who can be pretty smart when we recognize there’s something bigger than ourselves; something we can’t fully get a handle on. “O Lord, our God, how majestic is Your Name in all the earth. O Lord, what are human beings that You are mindful of them?” What is it about us, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, that You love so much?

God beyond us. God with us. God within us.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

1. Ralph Milton, Rumors, midrash@joinhands.com
2. Rev. Fr. Victor G. Spencer; South Africa; posted on PRCL – Preaching the Common Lectionary
3. Alyce McKenzie, Edgy Exegesis, Comments on Trinity Sunday.