

May 27, 2018  
*John 3:1-17*  
What Do We Do With the Trinity?  
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Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.’ Jesus answered him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born anew from above.’ Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?’ Jesus answered, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, “You must be born anew from above.” The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.’ Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can these things be?’ Jesus answered him, ‘Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?’

‘Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. *Words of God for the people of God. Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord, amen.*

I had a physics teacher in high school who was fond of saying, “This is the sort of thing I wouldn’t believe, even if it really happened.”

Today is “Trinity Sunday” – a day set aside to “celebrate” the unique triune character of our God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

“Celebrate” or stumble over? The complex theological doctrine of the Trinity has always managed to leave scholars frustrated and the faithful confused. Trying adequately to express the mystery of a God who is Three-in-One tends to leave us tongue-tied. It’s kind of like that physics teacher – it’s the kind of thing we have a hard time believing even if we know it’s a central part of our faith.

As the great novelist and Christian, Madeleine L’Engle wrote before her recent death: “The Trinity, like any other concept about God, ... is a groping attempt to explain wholeness to a fragmented race of mortals ...” ‘We worship one God in Trinity, and the Trinity in Unity,’ reads the creed which ends with ... ‘As also there are not three incomprehensibles, nor three uncreated,

but one uncreated, and one incomprehensible.’ “Well”, says L’Engle, “the whole thing is incomprehensible, but Thank God!” Madeleine L’Engle, *Penguins and Golden Calves: Icons & Idols* (Wheaton, Ill.: H.Shaw, 1996), 151.

If we fully comprehended it, it wouldn’t be God. In other words, at bottom it is a glorious mystery. Maybe that is why the church only has one worship day a year to focus on it.

A common symbol for the Trinity today a circle inscribed within an equilateral triangle. But during the first eight centuries of Christian art, the image of the triangle for the Trinity was not widespread – although on one of the gravestones in the catacombs there is a triangle in which the monogram of the name of Christ was placed.

The three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit – were often represented in art, but they were shown separately – like the icon you passed on the stand as you entered the sanctuary this morning. It is *called* “The Trinity” and it was created by Russian painter Andrei Rublev in the 15th century. It is *his* most famous work and perhaps the most famous of all Russian icons. My understanding is that *our* copy was presented to Trinity Presbyterian – that is us – this church – by St Luke’s Greek Orthodox Church here in Columbia some years ago.

Scholars tell us that the first time the three persons seem to have been placed together at all in symbolic form was in the fourth century, and that representation consisted of “a Hand, representing the Father or Creator God, a Lamb representing the Son and a Dove, representing the Holy Spirit.” We only know this from writings as there is no artistic rendering that has ever been found.

Some of the best attempts to express the Trinity symbolically however, have come from critiques of previous symbols.

The British essayist Sara Maitland, writes that “Although many of us have grown up gratefully with St. Patrick’s cloverleaf image of the Trinity – three leaves making up one clover leaf – I am not crazy about it – because, with a cloverleaf you can tear one of the leaves off a clover threesome and leave the other two still related and untouched by the tearing.” (Sara Maitland, *A Big Enough God* [New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1995], 15-16).

A more integrated symbol is that of Trinity Presbyterian’s (that is us – our church’s) triquetra. Otherwise known as the trinity knot, it is a more complicated shape formed into three intertwined leaf-like shapes that if pulled on any one end would make a knot in the middle of the three lobes. It is a design that, like many Christian symbols was adopted from a symbol that was originally pagan. The first known instances of the triquetra are found among German Pagans and Celtic pagans of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. It was adopted wholesale by Protestants during the Reformation as a symbol of the Holy Trinity of Christianity in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Another great *modern* symbol of the Trinity is a child’s pigtail. Here the Trinity is seen as a plait – three equal strands, smoothly interrelated. Similar to the triquetra, if you pull one of the strands out of a plait, the whole symbol collapses or comes apart.

It's what makes the triquetra and the pigtail symbols better at representing the Trinitarian God: You cannot have any two of the sources without the third because the whole thing falls apart. And particularly with plaiting, it is important to look at the whole pigtail and check that the hair has been reasonably, accurately divided into three. (Sara Maitland, *A Big Enough God* [New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1995], 15-16).

But even when you do a good job at representing the “what” in symbolic form (that is the three in one) it still doesn't take care of the “why.”

For that it takes a bit more theological imagination – such as that of the great pastoral theologian Frederick Buechner who once wrote that “If the idea of God as both Three and One seems unnecessarily obtuse and obfuscating, look in the mirror someday. There is (a) the interior life known only to yourself and those you choose to communicate it to (the Father). There is (b) the visible face which in some measure reflects that inner life (the Son). And there is (c) the invisible power you have in order to communicate that interior life in such a way that others do not merely know about it, but know it in the sense of its becoming part of who they are (the Holy Spirit). Yet what you are looking at in the mirror is clearly and invisibly the one and only you. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 93.

Taking a look at the way we treat our planet, theologian Sara Maitland has more to say regarding the pigtail symbolism. She says that “The orthodox churches of the East have suggested that perhaps the mainstream churches of the West have become excessively Christocentric – that their emphasis on the second person of the Trinity, God the son, has made the pigtail somewhat lopsided. We have made the strand of the Son too fat and allowed the strand of revelation in creation get too skinny; God's role as Creator and sustainer of the universe needs some fleshing out, some extra weight” (Sara Maitland, *A Big Enough God* [New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1995], 15-16).

I take that to mean that God is not just *over* creation but *in* creation in the same way that God is *in* us in Christ. God is as likely to come to us from the earth and from nature as God is from the heavens. Now we have something worth focusing on – something that can make a difference in how we live that is directly related to how we might understand the Trinity...

In 2002, I accepted an invitation to go on a Vision Quest in northern Ontario. I flew into Toronto, rode a train for five hours to Temagami village and then a float plane over to Sanskib Island. I was *in* the wilderness – let me tell you. Once there, some folks trained in dream interpretation, native American religious rituals all under the guidance of an Episcopal Priest, prepared thirty of us individuals from every kind of background you can imagine to go on a three day fast, alone in the northern Canadian wilderness.

The closer I got to Temagami and the last leg of the journey the more apprehensive I got. What in the world had I been thinking?! I'll tell you what it was – it was that there had to be more to who God was than how the church continued to conceive of God. And now, I was thinking that for my impudence, God was going to let me die alone in the woods.

When we arrived, we separated into three groups of ten; these were our dream groups. We spent four days together preparing for the quest by paying attention to our dreams. We then were taught how to fashion a sacred circle once we were alone and we spent hours in silence together

listening for the living spirit of God that was in the lake, in the trees, and in the animals in that place. The last thing we did to prepare for our journey into the wilderness was a cleansing sweat to ground us in our being as flesh and blood creatures.

We were given canoes and we set out from the island to the surrounding land with no food or water. We left our canoes on the shore and were told to hike no further than a few miles from where we left our canoe so that the leaders would have an idea of where we were “in case something happened.”

The only way I have to describe my experience there for those three days was that I was born again of the Spirit. For the first time in my life, I experienced God from the bottom up rather than from the top down. I felt a divine presence and a protection there that I had never felt before – simply by being open to it and making space for it through ritual. It was life changing. The sense of community I felt with the others on that quest – even though I was all alone was unlike anything I had ever experienced before. It all brought a balance to me that I felt was lacking before. Words have always failed to capture the essence of that experience, so I don’t talk about it much, but I touched on eternal life, the kingdom of God there in those Canadian woods.

Jesus counseled Nicodemus that if he really wanted to experience the kingdom of God, he himself would have to undergo a change of community and identity. He would need to be born *anowhen* – which can mean either, “from above” or “anew.” As a resident of this kingdom of God – as a re-created individual, Nicodemus was told he would be introduced to the wind of the Spirit and the sacrifice of the Son. Faced with all these fresh categories of divine activity, little wonder poor Nicodemus could only stammer, “How can these things be?”

“How can this be?” It is the great question throughout history when one is faced with the mystery of the Trinity – Three-in-One and One-in-Three...

The great writer Helen Waddell was the daughter of a Presbyterian Missionary. Her own faith informed her writing. In her most famous book “Peter Abelard”, written in 1933, the Canon of Notre Dame converses with one of Abelard’s fiery young disciples, Pierre, about the master’s latest treatise on the Trinity. Pierre asks: “Have you read it (De Trinitate), Gilles?”

Gilles nods yes.

“And is it heretical?”

“Of course it’s heretical. Every book that ever was written about the Trinity is heretical, barring the Athanasian Creed. And even that only saves itself by contradicting everything it says as fast as it says it.” Jesus himself, it appears from our text, was the original heretic...

In the long run, maybe the only way the church can ever hope to understand the triune nature of God is for the church to be more truly the church. If nothing else, the doctrine of the Trinity reveals in essence, that God exists as relationship. It is relationships that stand at the heart of the universe. Atoms do not exist unless they are in relationship with other atoms. You and I do not exist unless in relationships with others. So it would make sense that even God exists in relationship. The human soul is not only within. The human soul is not only without. The human

soul is somewhere between – in relationship.

This means that we exist personally, communally and socially in relationship with others and in relationship with creation. Our identity is as the body of Christ in relationships with this world. The measure of our faithfulness is found in our Good-News relationships *with* the world. It is in relationships that we can perhaps begin to incarnate the character of Father, Son and Holy Spirit into our lives as disciples.

I began with Madeline L'Engle, so I will end with her. During the 1990's at the time of the peace treaty between Jew and Arab, L'Engle said that much was made of the shaking of hands by Rabin and Arafat. But she noted pointedly that the newscasters at the time skipped over the fact that the two leaders had been invited to have dinner together with the president at the White House, and they refused. Yet what matters in the Middle East is eating together. You cannot kill someone you have shared a meal with. And so, says L'Engle, her heart sank. When will they eat together?

When will we all eat together, God's children of all colors, all ways of worship? When will we be one in the kingdom, sharing in the unity of the Trinity? Madeleine L'Engle, *Penguins and Golden Calves: Icons & Idols* (Wharton, Ill.: H. Shaw, 1996), 160.

That is the question and that, ultimately is the only meaning of the Trinity that really matters. Let us pray. Gracious God, we confess to you that understanding you as a Trinity is a problem for us. So help us to experience it for what it is a relationship. And help us incarnate that revelation through our relationships with others.

And bless these gifts we give that they may pave the way for all relationships with you. We pray these things in the name of Christ, Amen.