

THE TRINITY: GOD'S CRAZY MATH!

(05/27/18)

Scripture Lessons: 2 Corinthians 13:11-13
John 16:12-15
Unison Reading of the Nicene Creed

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.” (2 Corinthians 13:13)

Today, the first Sunday after Pentecost, is Trinity Sunday. It is a time to reflect on one of the fundamental doctrines of our faith, a doctrine that can help us understand God and therefore help to shape and deepen our faith, the quality of our relationship with God.

The trinitarian understanding of God evolved over time. It is not a major theme in Jesus' teachings or in the way the apostles articulate the faith of the early church. Their affirmation is simply that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, the Son of the living God. There is no discussion or explanation of the Trinity anywhere in the Bible. We find only a few references to it in one or two New Testament passages that date about fifty years after Jesus' death.

Not until the adoption of the Nicene Creed at the Council of Nicea in 325 CE, nearly two hundred years later, did the Trinity become a doctrine accepted by the church. At no point was an affirmation of this doctrine made a requirement for one's becoming a Christian. This indicates that the doctrine developed as people sought to understand the nature of God, Jesus' relationship to God, and the relationship of God and Jesus to the Holy Spirit.

As a doctrine, the Trinity is a matter of belief. Our beliefs about God shape the way we understand God. If our beliefs about God help us to deepen our understanding of and our relationship with God, then our beliefs are very important. We need to remember, however, that we are saved by faith, by the quality of our relationship with God, not by holding an orthodox belief system. This is because Christianity is primarily a relationship, not a religion.

The doctrine of the Trinity provides us with three ways of connecting with God, three ways that, despite their differences, are essentially the same. The trinitarian formula occurs quite commonly in our worship, usually expressed in the ancient patriarchal formula of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is articulated in the Gloria Patri:

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost.
As it was in the beginning
Is now and ever shall be:
World without end.*

After the offering we sometimes sing the old form of the Doxology:

*Praise God from whom all blessings flow;
Praise him all creatures here below;
Praise him above, ye heavenly host;
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.*

As we note this morning, two of our favorite hymns: “Holy, Holy, Holy” and “The Church’s One Foundation” articulate a trinitarian theology.

When we baptize children or adults, we do so in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit or some variation of this trinitarian formula. And at the conclusion of our worship, we receive the benediction that the apostle Paul extended to his churches:

*And now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the fellowship, communion, and guidance of the Holy Spirit
be and abide with each one of us this day and forevermore.*

The formulation of the Trinity as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost or Holy Spirit describes or differentiates God by using the analogy of a family. God is described as the father and Jesus as the son. The problem with this metaphor is that we don’t know exactly how the Holy Spirit fits in. We do know that this member of the family was originally thought of as feminine.

On one level the doctrine of the Trinity doesn’t make sense. God is three, yet one. One plus one plus one equals one. My son Corey once referred to this as “God’s crazy math,” a phrase that I have borrowed for my sermon title this morning. I think it must have been the irrationality of this “new” math that gave rise to the Unitarian-Trinitarian split of the last century. Some people are just more comfortable with paradox than others.

Even if we regard ourselves as Trinitarian, most of us will feel closer to or more deeply connected with one of these faces or *personae* of God than the others. For example, when we pray we tend to picture the God to whom we pray. Though we might feel more comfortable with

one than the others, each of the persons of the Trinity can serve to connect us with a different dimension of the majesty, mystery, and complexity of God.

Many years ago, in one of our confirmation classes, Wally Hite suggested a way of understanding the Trinity that I thought was ingenious. Wally suggested we picture God as a triangle with each of the three sides a different color. In keeping with church tradition, God the father would be yellow, Jesus would be red, and the Holy Spirit would be green. The three parts or lines or faces of the triangle are of the same essence; they are all part of the same triangle.

Wherever we stand, we will see one of these colors or faces of the triangle. But each color touches and blends into the other two. It seems to me that no matter which side of the triangle we face, behind each side is the center that we cannot see. This is the great mystery of God. However, we can actually see into a little bit of the center through each of the three sides.

To go back to our example, when some of us pray to God, we picture God as a loving father. We may know that God is not a white man with a long beard sitting on a golden throne just above the clouds, but this is the way that many of us picture him. We may know that even though the pronoun “him” is probably not an accurate way to describe God, because the true God is neither male nor female, many of us still picture and pray to God as a loving father.

This is fine. The purpose of the imaginal picture is to help us connect to God. When Jesus prayed to God he apparently pictured God as a father. He used the term “Father” in his prayers and in his teachings about God. He taught us, when we pray, to say: “Our Father, who art in heaven.” Jesus told us God is like a loving parent, like the father of the prodigal son.

When some of us pray we hold an image of Jesus in our mind. On communion Sundays we sometimes use this form of prayer. We talk to Jesus just as we would if he were actually sitting next to us. In doing this we hopefully experience Jesus as real, alive, and present to us. It is not uncommon to hear some people say that they feel more comfortable praying to Jesus because Jesus was human, just as we are, and thus more likely to understand our struggles.

When I pray to Jesus, I think of Jesus as a friend. I believe this understanding of our relationship with Jesus is supported in scripture. As recorded in John 15:13-14, Jesus tells his disciples,

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing, but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.

Because I consider myself a disciple of Jesus, and because I take seriously his invitation to regard him as a friend, I find it easy to talk to Jesus about my life: the parts that are weak and in need of strengthening, the parts that are broken and in need of healing. Because Jesus was a human being just like me, I know he understands.

There are also times when in my prayer I am not so much picturing as sensing God's presence as the Holy Spirit. I don't know exactly how to "picture" the Holy Spirit. I find it easier to picture God as either a father or "the man from Galilee." However, I sometimes experience God's spirit as a presence within me. This presence is like an energy field of compassion and love. When I am in this field, I am in the kingdom of God. When I am in the presence of this spirit, everything I think, feel, say, and do is guided by this presence. I feel not only more connected with but also more compassionate toward my brothers and sisters.

I use all three types of prayer. When I say a prayer of thanksgiving or a prayer of confession, I picture God as father. When I worship God, I think of God as a father. When I picture Jesus, I think more of relationship than worship. Although I view Jesus, an incarnation of God, as one of the persons of the Trinity, I don't worship Jesus. I actually don't think Jesus wanted his disciples or us to worship him.

Every morning (at least when I remember) I begin my day with a prayer. I say,

God, help me to be aware of your presence in my life today.

Help me to be open to you.

Help me to be open to the ways in which you will be trying to create me.

Help me to be open to the ways that, through me, you will be trying to create other

people and the world.

I begin my day with a prayer to God the creator. As I am going about my day, when I think of it (which is not as often as I should), I talk to the Jesus whom I know through both scripture and prayer. I ask Jesus what he thinks about something or someone. I ask Jesus what I should be thinking or feeling or doing. I do this just as I would if he were with me.

When I meditate, when I sit on my mat in silent prayer (which is not as often as I should), I experience the presence of God as Holy Spirit. I experience myself within a field of energy that flows through me and around me. It fills me with its presence, especially in those rare moments when I can empty myself, when I can move outside my self-centeredness, when I can set aside my petty concerns to make room for the presence of God.

When I pray for someone who is in need of healing, I frame it in the context of the Holy Spirit. I believe that if I enter deeply enough into the field of energy that underlies and connects me with the person for whom I am praying, my prayer strengthens the healing energies that are already present within that person. My little prayer may not be strong enough to actually bring about the healing for which the person longs, but I believe it does make a difference.

So I commonly pray to all three aspects or dimensions or persons of God during a given day. “Commonly,” by the way, does not mean often. I do not enter into any of these forms of prayer as often as I could or should, especially when I consider the apostle Paul’s directive to “pray without ceasing.” Pray without ceasing!

If the three are truly one, as the doctrine of the Trinity suggests, it doesn’t matter whom we picture as we pray. We are just facing the triangle from a certain direction. What is important is that we pray. When we pray, we deepen our relationship with God. Since faith is the quality of our relationship with God, when we pray we strengthen our faith.

The doctrine of the Trinity may be an example of God’s crazy math, but in some paradoxical way it gives us a bigger picture, a deeper understanding of God. It enables us to connect with the God who is present to us in nature and in history, especially the history of Israel and the Christian church. It enables us to connect with Jesus, whom we believe to be the Christ,

the incarnation of God. It also encourages us to listen for that still, small voice within us, the voice of the Holy Spirit who seeks to guide us as individuals and as a church.

I would add that for those of us who are Roman Catholic or Orthodox, or who grew up Roman Catholic or Orthodox, you may have a special feeling for and devotion to Mary, the Mother of God. I find it interesting that in the Western Church many of the saints and almost all of the mystics had a special devotion to Mary. So when you pray to or through Mary, you are not worshipping an idol, as some Protestants have accused you of doing; you may simply be connecting with God through a fourth side, through a more feminine channel, and you may be connecting with a more feminine side of God

But this would make our diagram a square and our doctrine of the Trinity would have to evolve into a doctrine of the Quarterternity to recognize the feminine side of God. I personally don't have any problem with this extension of "God's Crazy Math." However, today is Trinity Sunday, and we don't have a Quarterternity Sunday—at least not yet!

And so today, on Trinity Sunday, let us open our hearts to the mystery and majesty of that God whom we know as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, that God whom we experience as creator, redeemer, and friend, that this God might serve as our guide through the twisted maze of this earthly life.

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