

THE TRINITY -- GOD'S CRAZY MATH!

(05/26/2024)

Scripture Lessons: 2 Corinthians 13:11-13
John 16:12-15

“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 hopefully help to shape and deepen our faith, the quality of our relationship with God.

You might be surprised to learn that the trinitarian understanding of God evolved over time. It is not a major theme in Jesus' teachings or in the way the first 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 Nicaea in 325 CE, two hundred years later than the compilation of the gospels, did the Trinity become a doctrine accepted by the early 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 over time 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 God, our experience of God, and our relationship with God, then our beliefs are helpful. If our beliefs lead us astray, they are unhelpful and they may even be harmful. They may become a barrier to our spiritual life and growth.

The Methodist reformer John Wesley made a distinction that I find helpful. Wesley said that we are not saved by a belief or any system of beliefs, no matter how true those beliefs may be. Wesley echoed the apostle Paul and Augustine in his conviction that we are saved by faith, not by holding an orthodox system of beliefs.

In my attempt to make sense of Wesley's statement, I have come to see faith as the quality of our relationship with God. As Christians, it would be the quality of our relationship with God through Jesus; as a Buddhist, it would be the quality of our relationship with God through the Buddha. It is the quality of our relationship with the divine center and creator of our being

(who is also the divine center and creator of the entire universe) that heals us, that makes us whole, not our beliefs.

Beliefs are cognitions; faith is experiential; it is touched with numinosity. Beliefs are conceptual; faith is relational. As we know, the word that is translated as “faith” in our Bible is *pistis*, which is the Greek word for trust. Trust is relational; it occurs in the context of a relationship. We affirm this in our *belief* that Christianity is primarily a relationship, not a religion. So, you see, beliefs *can* be helpful!

As a syncretic thinker, it always made sense to me that there are different paths up the same mountain, different ways of looking at the same “object.” The doctrine of the Trinity provides us with three ways of connecting with God, three ways that, despite their different perspectives, are essentially the same.

The trinitarian formula occurs quite commonly in worship, usually expressed in the ancient patriarchal formula of God as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. 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, many churches 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.*

This morning, we are singing two of our favorite hymns, *Holy, Holy, Holy* and *The Church’s One Foundation*, both of which are eloquent articulations of a trinitarian theology.

In our church tradition, when we baptize children or adults, we do so in some variation of this trinitarian formula, e.g., God as creator, redeemer, and guide. 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 divine family was originally experienced 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 tickles my fancy! I think it must have been the irrationality of this "new" math that gave rise to the split between Unitarian and Trinitarian churches. Some people are apparently more comfortable with paradox than others!

Even if we regard ourselves as trinitarian, most of us 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 or gold, Jesus would be red, and the Holy Spirit would be green.

The three parts or faces of the triangle are of the same essence; they are all part of the same triangle. (I know it would be better if I could take Wally's two-dimensional model and somehow make it three-dimensional, but I can't quite wrap my mind about how to do this. I have to admit that I am challenged just picturing what is being described in the fascinating literary work *Flatland*.)

Going back to the two-dimensional model, wherever we stand in relation to the triangle will enable us to see one of these colors or faces of the triangle more clearly than the others. However, we need to remember that each line, 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 Center is the great mystery of the ineffable God. Although we can't see the center in our little thought experiment, we can actually see into a little bit of the center through each of the three sides. That we can only see a little bit of it should arouse in us a sense, a feeling of humility—certainly not pride or arrogance!

To go back to the matter of how a trinitarian way of "picturing" God might shape our faith, 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 (and a New England accent) 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, the God beyond gods, what Meister Eckhart and other mystics call “the Godhead,” is neither male nor female, many of us still picture and pray to God as a loving father.

This is fine! The purpose of our 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. In our imagination, we silently 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, a follower of Jesus and the Way, the spiritual path that he lived and taught, 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 twisted and in need of straightening, the parts that are broken and in need of healing. Because Jesus was a human being just like me, I know he understands. This is why I *talk with* Jesus more than *pray to* him. But that's just me.

There are also times when in my prayer I am not picturing something or someone; I am 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 a father or as “the man from Galilee.” However, I sometimes experience God's spirit as a presence within me. This presence is like an energy field of light and compassion and love. When I am in this field, I am in the kingdom of God, and everything I think, feel, say, and do is guided by this presence. As a result, I feel not only more connected with, but also more accepting and 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 to do so) 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.

This kind of prayer would fall into the category of what the German mystic Meister Eckhart would call a *via creativa*, 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 downstairs in my study 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 (an expression of what Meister Eckhart would call the spiritual discipline of *via negativa*), when I can move outside my self-centeredness, when I can set aside my ego-centric petty concerns to make room for the presence of God.

When I pray for someone who stands in need of healing, I frame my prayer in the context of the Holy Spirit. I believe that if, through prayer, I can enter deeply enough into the field of energy that underlies and connects me with the person for whom I am praying, my prayer will strengthen the healing energies that are already present within that person. My little, faltering 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, as you can see, 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." Imagine what it would mean to pray without ceasing! It would have to be close to what Saint Anthony, the desert father, meant when he said,

The prayer of the monk is not perfect until he no longer recognizes himself or the fact that he is praying.

Anthony seems to be implying that when this happens, as the Roman Catholic spiritual guide Henri Nouwen has suggested, our very life becomes a prayer.

If the three are truly one, as the doctrine of the Trinity suggests, then 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 might 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.

I have a colleague, a Baptist minister, who has written several excellent novels that touch on the theme of the integration of the feminine in men's psychospiritual development, serving as an antidote to the toxic masculinity that dominates our psychology, our culture, and most of our religion. Led by his dreams and his study of the various apparitions of Mary by little children around the world, this pastor has developed a deeper relationship with Mary; he now says the Rosary every day. I think this is absolutely beautiful! And he's a Baptist! Go figure!

In the 1950's, Pope Pius XII, on the basis of his dreams, proclaimed that the Assumption of Mary (in the flesh) into heaven, where she is "seated" with God, be accepted as dogma by the church. Carl Jung expressed his belief that the Dogma of the Assumption of Mary, the elevation of the feminine and matter ("in the flesh") and its inclusion into the Godhead, was the most important thing to happen to the church since the Protestant Reformation! This makes it pretty important!

Of course, this understanding of God would make our nice, neat, triangular diagram a square, and our doctrine of the Trinity would have to evolve into a doctrine of the Quaternity to recognize the feminine side or aspect of God. I personally don't have any problem with this extension or completion of God's crazy math! However, today is Trinity Sunday, and we don't celebrate a Quaternity Sunday in the church—at least not yet! Meister Eckhart, as our Tuesday

afternoon Spiritual Study & Growth Group learned this past year, was a big fan of this way of thinking.

And so today, on Trinity Sunday, let us open our hearts to the mystery and majesty of that God whom we know as Father, Mother, Child, and Spirit, that God whom we experience as creator, sustainer, redeemer, and friend, that this God might continue to create us, continue to help us evolve in all our fullness, and serve as our guide through the twisted maze of this earthly life.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
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An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.