

## Trinity Sunday B

How do we talk about a God who is infinite? Do the words omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent present a problem for faith? If it does you are not alone. This is the Sunday preachers dread when we talk about God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Just as one would choose an a la carte entrée most would rather take one person of God and leave the rest alone! But we can't do that. And neither could the historical church that grappled with the idea that God is three persons yet one.

Many ideas, metaphors and anecdotes have been offered to explain what is called a mystery. There is a tree in Johannesburg, South Africa, that stands in the yard of a Catholic retreat center. When viewing 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 — Three-in-One*. The base of the tree became a meeting ground where community was experienced. There, and around its trunks, the deep things of life were discussed. No matter where you leaned on the tree, you were supported. No matter where you gazed upon it, it was beautiful. Three trunks, one tree, inseparable and unified at its base, drawing us into fellowship with one another - It is an amazing illustration.

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 YHWH, 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 who empowers, luring us into loving relationship with God's self and with one another. It is just so amazing! As one tree down to the very roots God comes to us as three yet one.

What about water: H<sub>2</sub>O? Water naturally occurs as a gas in water vapor, liquid as in rain, and solid as in ice. In fact during my wedding reception in Ortmyer Hall we experienced an Ice Castle sculpted in Robyn's and my honor in all three forms.

H<sub>2</sub>O — which can be a gas, a solid or a liquid but is still and always H<sub>2</sub>O at a molecular level, or the egg with its yolk, white and shell, or the executive, judicial and legislative branches of

government, or they learn St. Patrick's cloverleaf metaphor. You can probably think of a lot more of these, all trying to explain the concept of being one-in-three and three-in-one (sort of like a spiritual Certs, if you remember the old commercial).

The mathematical approach is also attractive, the equilateral triangle being the most popular math symbol for the Trinity. While  $1 + 1 + 1 = 3$  doesn't work to explain the Trinity,  $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$  works much better.

All these metaphors and explanations, though, fall short and we're 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've been lifelong churchgoers. Church history itself reveals an eclectic and often violent debate over the metaphysics of the whole thing.

Trying to use definitive terms to describe God is a bit like nailing Jell-o to a tree — eventually the thing falls apart. You might as well try to milk a gnat or sneak sunrise past a rooster.

The Church under Emperor Constantine tried to nail the Jello. The bishops that met at their first General Council felt the church was coming apart. No one had definitive language to explain the nature of God as the Father in heaven, as the Son who dwelled among us and the Spirit who dwells within us. A young priest named Arius dared to teach that Jesus was human but not divine and his teaching caught on like wild fire. This created a perceived threat to Christianity and the empire. For the good of the whole, sadly, the minority was quashed. People forgot that doctrine is humanly conceived and made based on common observations. Some way was sought to take human teaching on this Triune nature of God and make it the norm. Instead of condemning and banishing folks like Arius perhaps the Church would have been better to emphasize the dynamic relationships God revealed about Himself.

In Romans 8, Paul doesn't try to line out a systematic theology of how God works. He uses trinitarian terms interchangeably — the Spirit, Father, Christ — but doesn't try to make it a treatise on metaphysics. Rather, Paul sees God at work in a uniquely relational way, both within God's own nature and with humans.

After admonishing his Roman readers in verses 12-13 to discern the difference between living in the flesh (focusing on the self-oriented life) and the Spirit (focusing on the God-oriented life), Paul then shifts the language to relationships — that those who live by the

Spirit are adopted by the Father as children of God and co-heirs with Christ, whose glory is realized through suffering (8:14-17). Whatever the Trinity is in *being*, the purpose of God, the three-in-one/one-in-three, is to bring humans back into relationship with God, rescuing us from having to try to define ourselves through self-destructive pursuits.

You can approach this passage and others that seem to reference 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 a train 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 the Trinity is not to be a head trip where we simply meditate and ruminate about the nature of God, 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" (8:16).

Is this human attempt at defining God's being important? Only as it helps us understand that God wants to enter into relationship with us through both his Son Jesus and His Spirit, whose shape is far different than we can imagine.

What about a different shape — an alternative description, a subtle shift of perception? John of Damascus, one of the early church fathers who lived during the late seventh and early eighth centuries, eschewed the normal definitions and calculated reasoning about the Trinity and came up with a wholly different term for the oneness and threeness of God — *perichoresis*, which translated from Greek means "go around." John writes that--"**by going around (and through) each other,**" the Holy Trinity does not mix, commingle but cleaves to one another. (Show Danza)

In other words, the Trinity is not primarily defined by the distinctiveness or unity or "substance" of the persons involved, but rather as a circle — a dynamic community defined by love. To see one is to see all — to dance with one is to dance with all, being invited into the circle and into a love relationship where we see God face to face, as children hold hands and dance with loving parents.

Circles are natural, appearing everywhere from the sun and moon to the earth itself. Makes sense then, that we should be thinking of a circle as the dominant paradigm that shapes our understanding of God's creative and relational nature. You can't define a circle by its points. You can only define it as a whole.

The truth is that we'll probably never understand the Trinity by trying to define it. Even Paul, one of the most prolific writers and theologians of his day, runs round the idea. The only way we'll really "get" the Trinity is to join the circle and live into that relationship.

What a difference that would make! AMEN