

Is Three Enough?

Today is Trinity Sunday, the day when pastors traditionally are asked to roll up their sleeves and take another whack at trying to explain how God can be three separate persons (Father, Son & Holy Spirit) yet one being. How Jesus is God's Son while at the same time being God, and how the Holy Spirit is God yet proceeds from God.

It is the ultimate brain teaser. I have seen some valiant and creative efforts using an apple (with core, fruit, and peel), an egg (with yolk, white, and shell) and water (liquid, ice, and steam) to illustrate how something can be three different things, yet only one thing. But while helpful, they're not really the same.

Over the years, the church has done more harm than good in trying to define the Trinity, a word that, incidentally never appears in the Bible. Arguments over the nature of the Trinity nearly destroyed the early Christian church in its infancy. That crisis was temporarily averted only when Emperor Constantine locked the squabbling parties in a room, and wouldn't let them out until they reached some sort of agreement.

The result was the Nicene Creed which sounds in some ways like it was written by a legal department for product liability. Even that precisely-worded document contributed to the permanent breakup of the church into Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox because of disagreement over a single word.

And I wonder how many congregations have ever attracted a single new member or changed a person's life because of how well they defined the Trinity.

In dealing with those realities at this late stage in my career, I've either grown wiser or lazier. Because I no longer have any enthusiasm for trying to explain the inexplicable. Yet I believe in the Trinity. So how do I talk about one of the bedrock foundations of Christian belief in a way that is both true and meaningful?

To my relief, I found the answer in our Gospel reading for today from the familiar 3rd chapter of John. A very earnest and respected teacher of Israel named Nicodemus, comes to Jesus looking for spiritual wisdom.

Jesus provides it, saying, "Truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

Unfortunately, like a lot of well-meaning religious folks, Nicodemus takes what Jesus says in its most literal form possible, even when it doesn't make any sense.

“How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?”

Jesus patiently explains that living in the new reign of God requires an awakening to the deep truths of God's creation that are so revolutionary that it is the spiritual equivalent of being born into a whole new life.

Still stuck on trying to work out the logistics of a physical rebirth, Nicodemus totally misses the point. “How can these things be?” he says.

Jesus can hardly believe such an intelligent man can be so clueless. “Are you a teacher of Israel and, and yet you do not understand these things?”

I wonder if Jesus wouldn't say something similar about doctrinal disputes over the Holy Trinity.

Trying to define the Trinity is like trying to appreciate the Mona Lisa by analyzing the chemical composition of the materials used to paint it. Even if you get it right, that analysis will tell you nothing about that painting and why it is great art.

Similarly, analyzing the tonal patterns and progressions of a song or the rhetorical makeup of a speech tells us nothing about how a performance can affect us so profoundly that it moves us to tears.

So instead of spending our time dissecting the morphology of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, why don't we approach it as we do art? Rather than thinking we can understand the Trinity by trying to pull it apart and replicate its DNA, why don't we focus on how it touches our hearts, moves our souls, and changes our lives.

The Trinity refers to three ways in which we experience God. One of those ways is as the Creator, the one who is responsible for us being here in the first place. When we think of the Creator, we think of unimaginable power. We think of the spectacular, other-worldly power described in Isaiah's mysterious, smoke-filled temple vision that we read today.

We think of the One to whom the 14.5 billion years of the universe's existence is as the blink of an eye. Who can create a universe so limitless that this planet on which

7.6 billion people spend their entire lives is less than a microscopic speck of dust in comparison.

There are other attributes of this Creator we can experience as well.

- Wisdom so great as to design the intricacies that make up quantum physics, ecological systems, and laws of mathematics.
- Creative majesty so versatile as to create breath-taking mountain vistas, sparkling waterfalls, delicately designed flowers, the unmatched beauty of a sunset.
- The Israelites were among the first to recognize another attribute of the Creator: a burning thirst for justice. A stern demand that everything and every one of God's creations be treated with respect, for the purposes which God intends.

The power of the Creator was something Nicodemus understood well. "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."

Such power is to be respected, and religions of all kinds have recognized and honored this power. But what if this power and majesty and were the only way we could experience God? The immense gulf between God and us would be impossible for us to bridge. We would live in terror of such power.

We would know God only as a Mighty Artist who lives far away in a place we could never visit, whom we do not know personally but only by his works. It would be no more possible for God to have any kind of a meaningful relationship with us than you or I could have with an electron. The world would be a cold, hard place.

Fortunately, there is another way we can experience God: as the Redeemer. The one who showed us that God is not only powerful beyond understanding, but loving beyond imagination.

It is in the person of Jesus that we experience the love of God. As Jesus explains the relationship to Nicodemus, "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."

God so loved the world. How do we know this is true? How could we possibly experience and understand the love of this God who is beyond our understanding? By God appearing to us as Immanuel—God With Us.

By God coming to us as someone way different from the brilliant but distant Master of the Universe, but in the form of a human just like us.

In his compassionate teachings, his life of sacrifice and forgiveness, and his death and resurrection, Jesus showed that this mighty God we have such trouble understanding is pure love—a person who created this wonderful world out of love, who gave it to us out of love, who gave us the gift of free will to do with it what we chose, out of love.

Jesus showed us, up close and personal, that God's whole point in all of creation was to share. He showed us that love is a force greater than any other power in the universe, and that joyful servanthood and not dominance is the key to peace.

He was the one who showed us that this powerful, impersonal God can actually be called Father. Not as a demonstration of male dominance. Our daughter worked one summer with inner city children from the worst neighborhoods of New York City. One girl always wore long-sleeve shirts and pants even in the hottest weather.

Mikhaila finally found out why. The girl's arms and legs bore the scars of cigarette burns inflicted by her dad. For her, the image of God as her father would have driven her off, screaming in terror. What she needed, and what all of us need, was the image of unconditional love that Jesus described in the story of the Prodigal Son.

By appearing to us in the forms of an unconditionally loving parent and his Son, God showed us that life is all about relationship and that God desires that relationship with us. Jesus showed us that whenever the relationship is broken, God is ready to bend over backwards to redeem it.

But the power of the Creator and the love of the Redeemer are not the only ways God comes to us. We can learn all about who God is and what God desires, but how do we internalize that knowledge so that it actually makes a difference in our lives?

Jesus told Nicodemus exactly how that happens: *No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.* God comes to us in the form of the Spirit that activates us to live the life God intends. It does so in these ways:

The Spirit acts on our emotions. Where does the concept of joy come from, if not from the Spirit? Where does the notion of beauty come from, if not the Spirit? When I feel lonely, or pessimistic, or upset, or angered, or embittered, what pulls me out of it?

The Spirit of God can dissolve the hatred that consumes me, cut the chains of sadness that drag me down, calm the anxiety that paralyzes me. The Spirit can take the love that constantly pours forth from God and apply it to our broken and wounded selves where we need it the most.

The Holy Spirit acts on our minds. I am a firm believer that God assists the flow of ideas into people's heads. I cannot tell you how many times I have been writing a book, article, or sermon when all of a sudden an idea pops into my head and I can't help but wonder, "where did that come from?"

I know the answer, and it isn't that I was so clever as to figure it all out on my own. Sometimes the Spirit of God points you in the direction you need to go. I believe the spirit of God is acting in the world whenever new ideas or visions come into being that benefit creation.

I believe the spirit of God helps us to make decisions. Whenever we wrestle, individually or as a group, with issues, ideas, and choices, the spirit of God is available to us to help in that process.

The Holy Spirit acts on our will. This is more than just a matter of giving us the willpower to resist temptation and sin. God's spirit puts into my will new desires. It makes me want to be a better person. It makes me want to give more of myself to God's work.

I am sure that every great accomplishment in all of human history began with the birth of a desire in some human heart. And I know where that desire comes from—from the Spirit of God.

Finally, the Holy Spirit acts on our memory. It reminds us time and again of what God has done in the past, how God acted in the lives of the faithful throughout history. In so doing, it grows faith. Faith that helps us believe the promises God has made to us for the future. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit to prod our memories to stir up those feelings of love, appreciation, and insight.

Whenever someone says,

“I’ve never forgotten what my mother did that time when I needed . . .”

Or “I’ve never forgotten when our car broke down on that country road and this stranger . . .

Or, “I’ve never forgotten how God’s comfort carried me through that terrible time when . . .”

Or, “I’ve never forgotten that Sunday School teacher who took the time to . . .”

Or “I’ve never forgotten that time when the members of this congregation came through for me when I really needed it . . .”

When you remember these things, you are feeling the Spirit of God blowing across the face of the earth.

The old romantic poem begins: How do I love thee; let me count the ways. The concept of the Trinity allows us to count the ways God loves us.

God comes to us:

In the form of The Creator, the author of life, a being of infinite love and immense power who desires to share loving relationship with the created, and has given us the gift of life for that purpose.

In the form of Jesus, the greatest evidence of that love, whose life, death, and resurrection showed us what God’s true nature is. Recognition of this rescues us from the destructiveness of our own natures, and allows us to be with God, now and forever.

In the form of the Holy Spirit that is an active force in our lives and in the shaping of God’s reign on earth.

Given the infinite possibilities available to God, is three enough? Could there be other ways in which God interacts with us? I suspect God can come to us in more ways and more forms **(Slide #15)** than we can count.

But our minds are blown as it is, trying to make sense of God in Three Persons. Three is all we can handle, often more than we can handle.

So instead of getting hung up on creating a schematic chart of the detailing intricacies of the divine relationships, today let's simply give thanks for the Trinity by which God comes into our lives.