

Sermon – Trinity Sunday  
“Divine Arithmetic” – June 15, 2104

I was riding in a car to Mamallapuram – an ancient coastal city in India where there are beautiful sandy temples on the shore. Here you can see the influence of Buddhism on Hinduism in the shapes and features of the carvings at the temple. During the two-hour drive to this town, the driver, a Hindu man in his late fifties, asked me to tell him about the Christian God. So I told him that Christians believe in one God, but who is three distinct yet fully unified persons: the Creator, often called Father or Mother; the Redeemer, or Jesus; the Sustainer, who we call the Spirit. As I shared this impossible description of the God of our understanding, the gentleman nodded his head broadly. He said: “That makes perfect sense.”

I have never forgotten that conversation – which took place now more than 14 years ago – because I have never had one quite like it, ever. Christians are quick to assign the word “mystery” to the doctrine of the trinity – and appropriately so. We are quick to say that the trinity is simply not comprehensible – particularly to our Westerners sensibilities. When we try to wrap our heads around the concept of one in three and three in one, it is hard to get the math to add up quite right.

So on this Trinity Sunday, let me take you to another conversation: one that took place in a class that was held on an October evening in the Parlor. The amazing teenagers who were confirmed last week were sitting in a circle on the couches and chairs in the parlor. It was a cool fall night, and they had already done a series of icebreakers, shared timelines

of their faith stories with one another, and talked about words for God that were meaningful to them. As we raised the question: “Who is God?” the conversation turned to the Trinity.

The Trinity is *not* a doctrine derived from Scripture – as is our doctrine on the sacraments, for example. Yet while there is not a direct reference to the Trinity in scripture, there is Biblical evidence that critical to our understanding of the Trinity.

So pointed out stories like:

- the creation narrative where God is present as the Creator, the Spirit hovering over the waters and the Logos/word – that we believe became flesh and dwelt among us in Jesus,
- the baptism of Jesus – where the heavens opened and the Spirit descended like a dove, and the voice of the Creator spoke, claiming Jesus as the beloved son.
- the poetic beginning of John’s Gospel which suggests that Jesus was with God and IS God – not to mention language throughout John’s gospel that points to Jesus’ inherent unity with God – in identity, in purpose, in intent for humankind.

We noted that the doctrine of the trinity is, rather, is a theological construct whose specific origins arise out of the Council of Nicea which was convened in 325 AD. One of the main questions on the table was how to understand the special role of Jesus in light of our belief in ONE God. Was Jesus one with God? Was Jesus the firstborn of all creation – a creature just like us? A doctrine emerged from this council known as the doctrine of *homoousious*. God the Creator and Jesus the

Son were understood to be of the same divine substance – fully one in essence, yet distinct in personhood. Eventually the Spirit was understood in these terms as well. This doctrine allowed for the continued belief in the one true God of Israel, while likewise acknowledging the fullness of the divine initiative revealed to us in Christ, and the divine presence of the Spirit dwelling with us. And though it took decades for this belief to gain traction, the Nicene creed, which talks about “Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only begotten from the Father, that is from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, one in being with the Father, through whom all things were made...” remains one of the oldest Confessions of our faith.

As we seek to wrap our heads around this foundational doctrine, there is no way to make sense of the math. So we, like many, turned to imperfect, limited analogies. But we did a game that went something like this: **we named the analogy**, but then we talked about what “worked” and what didn’t with our understanding of the Trinity.

So let’s play a game too. If you have heard this analogy before, raise your hand when I introduce it.

**God is like water.** Water is always the same molecular compound of H<sub>2</sub>O, but can be found in different forms: ice, water, vapor. **What we liked:** We liked the consistent image of one substance in three forms – with three ways of relating to the environment. **What we didn’t like:** That the same molecular structure cannot exist in all three forms at once. The Triune God is ALWAYS creator, redeemer and sustainer – not a holy shape-shifter that changes between a creator, an incarnational Jesus, and the Spirit blowing in our midst. The

analogy only works if H<sub>2</sub>O can be ice, water and vapor always, all the time.

Analogy #2: **God is like an apple:** one in essence, with distinctly different parts: seeds, flesh, stem. What we liked: the way to name the unique attributes of each being as part of the larger whole. **What we didn’t like:** That each element could easily they could be separated out from each other. Each element of the apple was only a *part* of the whole. With God, each member of the trinity is always fully God.

Then we talked about how **God is like a person**, say, like Pastor Randy, who is a Father, a husband and a pastor all at the same time. And he is always each, and always himself. He is one person with three different ways of relating to the world. **We really liked** this analogy as an expression of how each person of the trinity embodies a different way in which God relates to the world: as creator, as redeemer, as sustainer. Our analogy fell short when we observed that Randy only relates as father to Charlotte and Ian, is only a husband to Beth, and only a pastor to this congregation. God is Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer to all, all of the time.

Our analogies helped us see components of the Trinity, but none allowed us to see the whole with perfect clarity. So we wondered together what it is about the Trinity that we need to understand if we can’t understand the arithmetic of the three in one. What is it about the trinity that is so essential to our faith, apart from claiming the divinity of Christ?

Dan Migliore says: “the starting point of Trinitarian faith is the good news of the love of God in Christ that continues to work transformingly in the world by the Holy Spirit. The doctrine of the Trinity is the church’s effort to give

coherent expression to this mystery of God's free grace announced in the gospel and experienced in Christian faith."<sup>1</sup>

**At the heart of Trinitarian theology is the belief that the fullness of God's love for us is made known through the distinctive yet unified initiative of love made known to us through our God who is Creator, the Redeemer and the Sustainer.** The Triune God is a God who lovingly engages with the world God made *always* offering life – and life abundant.

The trinity invites us into a knowledge that **God is inherently and essentially relational.** As children of God, made in God's image, this awareness suggests that we were formed for relationship too. And if we are to get any clues as to the nature of this relationship from the trinity, we are to see that the quality of relationship to which we are called is *mutual, edifying, loving.*

The Trinity is important to us because it speaks of the wideness of God's love for us – and points us toward a community that it invested in loving others. Through an understanding of the Trinity we come to know a God whose love for us is revealed to us through creation – through mountains and oceans and stars and flowers and pets and people, all fearfully and wonderfully made. We see God's love for us revealed in bright ideas and beautiful art and music that gets into our souls. We see God's love revealed to us through forgiveness, through initiatives that foster wholeness, through prophetic teachings, through risk-taking love. And we see God's love revealed to us through the breath of life, through wisdom and guidance, through the strength to take a stand or

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<sup>1</sup> Migliore, Daniel. *Faith Seeking Understanding*. P 59.

make a change for the good. We see God's love revealed to us in prayer, in works of justice, in moments of consolation when we are inconsolable.

And the Trinity calls us to community. As a church – and as citizens of this world – we are called to a community in which we dare to put love into action in radical and life-giving ways. In witness to the love and power of the Triune God, we are called to love our neighbor, to welcome the stranger, to enact a Kingdom justice that overturns the systems of this world that oppress or injure or suppress anyone's ability to hear that they *are*, in fact, loved by God. Shirley Guthrie writes:

The freedom and power of the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together is freedom and power not to dominate and control, but freedom and power to be God-with-us and for us. It is not freedom and power to do anything and everything God pleases, but freedom and power to be a loving and just covenant-making God who wills only our good. It is freedom and power exercised not to keep us powerless slaves but to set us on our feet and empower us to be God's faithful friends, companions, and partners. The freedom and power of this God, therefore, is not something we must fear, secretly resent, and rebel against because it robs us of our human dignity and freedom; it is the source of true human dignity and freedom.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Guthrie, Shirley. *Christian Doctrine*. P 93.

We are called to be people of the Triune God – a God who is ever creating, ever redeeming, ever sustaining – showering us with grace upon grace. We are called to humble gratitude for the wideness of God’s mercy, for the faithfulness of God’s love, and for the enduring transformation that is a fruit of the power of the resurrection. And we are called to action: to live out love, to feed those who are hungry; to free those who are oppressed; to shelter the homeless; to welcome all of God’s children in spite of the dividing walls that the world tries to construct: walls that keep people out because of the color of the skin, their gender or class, or who they love. We are called to a life of faithfulness, mutual edification – to recognize that, by God’s grace, we are better together than we would ever be alone.

Amen.