

## “Three Equals One? Only in the Church!”

**T**his morning, we’ve had a full slate of outstanding readings, and a good sermon could be preached on any of them. But when I saw that our Gospel included the famous John 3:16 passage, I was reminded that it appeared in the Gospel a couple of months ago, in the middle of Lent. Fr. Jeff was the preacher that day. Though I can’t recall exactly what he said, I’m willing to bet that he spent some time on John 3:16. And then I thought about how cool it would be if I preached on John 3:16 as well, and then we could get some “dueling sermon” action going on. *Cue the banjo, Earl!*

But then I remembered that it’s Trinity Sunday. And Trinity Sunday is the only major feast of the Church Year that doesn’t focus on someone, or some event in the life and ministry of Jesus. No, this day focuses on a doctrine. And I remembered being taught that the Doctrine of the Trinity is one of those core, basic doctrines of the Church. And so essential is it to our identity that some people would be so bold as to say that if you don’t accept and embrace the Doctrine of the Trinity, then you can’t rightly call yourself a Christian. Now, I probably wouldn’t go quite that far, because honestly it’s hard to accept and embrace something you have a hard time even understanding. And I’m talking about myself here; I’m pretty sure I don’t have this whole Triune God thing quite nailed down. So, I figure the more times I preach about the Trinity on Trinity Sunday, can only increase the odds that, one day, I may actually know what I’m talking about. At least I can hope for that. So, let’s set John 3:16 to the side, and wrestle with the elephant in the room.

Basically, the Doctrine of the Trinity is one solution to the problem of *How do we talk about a God who is too big for human brains to even begin to comprehend?* How do we do that? And I think it’s because we humans love a challenge that we have tried over and over again to come closer to a way of talking about God that seems to jibe not only with our intellectual conclusions but also our experiential conclusions.

But no matter how much we try, we’re never really successful because human language lacks the capacity for the level of nuance that is required for a conversation about the nature of God. Even our religious and liturgical language, though arguably better, is still not quite up to the task, and leave themselves open to frequent misunderstandings.

For example, a young woman visited the United States from a country where English was not her primary language. On Sunday, her host family took her to church with them. She watched and listened very carefully. Later, she asked her hosts, “Why do you omit the West Coast in your prayers?” Not understanding what she was referring to, they asked, “What do you mean?” She replied, “Well, several times, you prayed in name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the whole East Coast. But never once did you mention the whole West Coast.”

Hopefully that’s not a true story. Nevertheless, we are a tenacious bunch, and, as Christians, we say a lot of things about God. And what we say about God is called theology; literally *theo-logos*, “god words.”

For example, some of the things we say about God might include:

- That God existed before all of the created order.
- That God is more powerful than anything else in the created order.
- And that God exists in all places, and at all times.

Now, that’s just three of any number of things we might say about God, but just try to wrap your mind around any one of them. It’s tough, isn’t it? Well, often, when we fail to understand God, when we fail at our attempts to describe God, we apt to make jokes about it, like:

“Can God make a rock so big that even God can’t pick it up?”

Now, don’t spend too much time on that question, because I’ll give you a hint: Whether the answer is Yes or No, in the end we’re not dealing with God.

However, not only do we make jokes about things we can’t understand, in the Church we make a day of it. And so, as I mentioned at the outset, today is the Feast Day of the Holy Trinity, or, more simply, Trinity Sunday. And as I also mentioned before, the Doctrine of the Trinity is, at the same time, one of the most fundamental doctrines of the Christian Church, and one of the most difficult to describe. It’s enigmatic, to say the least.

But on Trinity Sunday, we embrace the enigma. We gaze into the abyss, and then we take notes. And on this first Sunday after the Pentecost, we are bold to assert that God is simultaneously three persons in one. Not three persons that seem like one. Nor one person with three personalities. Rather, on this day, we assert something that is physically impossible: that Three equals One, and One

equals Three. And *only in the Church* are we likely to run into a mathematics of this sort.

All of which reminds me of a bit from the stand-up routine of a once-popular comic. One day, his young daughter came home from school, proudly announcing that she has learned addition. The family was appropriately delighted, and asked for an example. “Two plus two equals four,” the child declared. And her family praised her, until she finally asked her parents what a “two” was.

Very often, that’s us when it comes to trying to define the Trinity— we can come up with a description, but we’re not entirely sure what it means. Nevertheless, that hasn’t stopped us over the years from taking the things that some very smart people have said about the Trinity, and memorializing them in writing. Certainly, our *Book of Common Prayer* is filled with all sorts of statements about God. Even the Nicene Creed, which we’ll recite in a few minutes, is a very early statement about what we believed about God.

But therein lies the problem. Whenever we start taking things that we say we believe about God, and start writing them down, sooner or later, someone is going to confuse the writing, the statement, with what it’s pointing to. That is, we confuse the *description* of God, with God himself. And so keenly have we sometimes embraced one particular description of God, that blood has almost literally been shed when someone suggested we change it.

Let me give you a brief example. A very early version of the Nicene Creed said this about the Holy Spirit:

“We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,  
who proceeds from the Father.”

However, in the year 1014, the Bishop of Rome decided to add three words to this statement about the Holy Spirit, to suggest that the Holy Spirit proceeds not just from the Father, but from the Father *and the Son* (which is how *our* Nicene Creed reads). The negative response to this was *so* strong that, by the year 1054— a mere 40 years later— the Christian Church had literally split into two factions. And *to this day*, those groups that descended from the one faction still claim that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father and the Son,” while those who descended from the other faction still claim the Spirit proceeds from the Father. Period.

So, what does that tell us? Well, obviously, that words matter. That the words we employ in worship and faith are important. However, too often, we forget that words are finite, while God is infinite. We forget that, while words may provide us with an image or description of God— a snapshot of God, if you will— the words are not God. They merely reflect a truth about God that has been

experienced by one person, or by one community of people, at one point in time. And while the words are important, they shouldn't be chiseled in stone because, who knows when we'll learn something new about God that challenges some of the things we once held onto very dearly.

Although Christians have long understood how limiting words can be, I think it's been only during the last few centuries that we've been exploring other words for God. For example, at various times and in various places, people have experimented with replacing "God the Father" with "God the Mother," or with "God the Parent," or even with "God the Creator." Greek words have been employed, such as *Sophia*, *Logos*, and *Spiritus*. Parallel words, such as "creator," "redeemer," and "sustainer" have been used. Even some metaphysical words have been tried, such as "energy," "wisdom," "light," and "justice."

Now, however off-putting some of this may be, what I find attractive and exciting about these new approaches, is that it shows us just how much people are still trying to know and understand God. People are trying to put their experiences of God into words, into accurate and meaningful descriptions.

However, what I find worrisome about all this, is the all-too-human tendency to try and find a one-size-fits-all name or description for God. It won't work! It always has been, and always will be, impossible to fully comprehend God. And this is why, I think, the ancient Hebrew people refused to name God; they understood the limits of their language.

So, where do we go from here?

Well, first off, I think we need to remember that the point of Christianity has never been to try and figure out God by reading or learning about him. Rather, the point has been to experience the presence of God, and then, based upon our reflections of that experience, to try to come to some conclusions. But even so, how do we do that? How do finite human beings experience an infinite God? Good question!

And so, it may be that best thing you might try, is something I haven't done in a very long time. When I was in college, two friends and I drove straight through from San Antonio, Texas to Three Rivers, Michigan to visit a Benedictine monastery. During the middle of one night, we were driving through the Smoky Mountains and decided to stop at a scenic overlook. Though it was summer, it was cold that high in the mountains, so we lay across the warm hood of our car, and gazed into the night sky. What we saw were more stars than we had ever seen before. We saw stars and constellations, moons and meteors, planets and even the Milky Way. That's what we saw. But what we felt was awe, for we had a sense that we were looking at the face of God.

However, as much as we *could* see, we also realized that there was so much more that we *couldn't* see. There were countless stars and planets, galaxies and suns, whose light hadn't yet reached the earth. And Trinity Sunday reminds us that God is like that. What we see of God, what we experience of God, what we understand of God, is only a small fraction of the totality of God. So much of God is hidden from our eyes. Or, to quote from St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians, "Now [we] know only in part." But one day, God willing, "[we] will know fully, even as [we] have been fully known" (1 Cor 13:12).

In the end, there is, within all human beings, a small part and a large part. The small part is our finite structure, our limited selves. But the large part is our capacity to dream, and imagine, and wonder. And so much of the mystery of God the Holy Trinity is hidden in our dreams and imaginings. But when we probe into that mystery, what we will likely find is the goodness, and love, and grace of our God who— though he cannot be fully known— and yet, on a clear night, he can certainly be glimpsed.

Amen.