

There probably is no Christian teaching more confusing to us than the Trinity. English preacher, Colin Morris, once said that any preacher with any good sense will call in sick on Trinity Sunday. It's true! On Trinity Sunday it is a tricky and often risky thing for us preachers to try to preach Christian doctrine to an already comatose crowd— the most dense, challenging, and mysterious of all doctrines, the doctrine of the Trinity. Even in John Wesley's sermon “On the Trinity,” it seems he was conveniently pressed for time and without his usual books for consultation saying, “Some days since I was desired to preach on this text. I did so yesterday morning. In the afternoon I was pressed to write down and print my sermon, if possible, before I left Cork. I have wrote it this morning; but I must beg the reader to make allowance for the disadvantages I am under; as I have not here any books to consult, nor indeed any time to consult them.”

Cork, May 8, 1775. *"There are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: And these three are one."* 1 John 5:7.

Explaining the Trinity is not like some mysterious and strange mathematical equation to understand: $1 + 1 + 1 = 1$. Or an attempt at using analogies like the three phases of water: liquid, vapor, and ice. Or like a tree: roots, trunk, and branches. Or an egg: the shell, the egg white, and the yolk. Or a triangle. Or a three-leaf clover. Or a family: father, mother, child. Or even, Wesley's three candles in a room, one light by which to read. While all of these explanations try to explain the unexplainable, they all ultimately fall short. The Trinity is simply a statement. A statement about the specific, peculiar, unique nature of the God who has humbly come near to us relationally as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I remember my first attempt at explaining this doctrine. I was the interim youth director at Trinity United Methodist Church in Blythewood and I was invited one morning by the

director of the children’s afterschool daycare program to lead the children in a last minute devotional and prayer. Scrambling for something, anything to talk about I saw the big United Methodist flame and cross logo hanging front and center in the Trinity Learning Center gym and it just came to me. Tell them what the Trinity is and why it’s in the buildings name. Children of all ages were sitting, legs crossed, in a circle at center court as I taught them the most complex doctrine in Christian history.

Pointing to the far wall, I asked them, “boys and girls, would you look at our daycares logo with me? What do you see?” A few hands went up ready for me to call on them, when one clever boy piped up and yelled loudly, “I see a wall!”

When you’re literally standing in the center, surrounded by 50 children, patience is truly a virtue.

“Very good,” I said. “And what is on that wall?” I asked the boy.

“A picture!” he answered back.

Did I mention how clever this boy was? It was time to move on from him.

“Yes... and what is on that picture?” I called on a girl with her hand patiently raised.

“The cross,” she said.

“Very, very good. And how many points on the cross do you see?

“Four!” she exclaimed.

Stumped, because that was not the answer I was looking for, I looked closer at the cross and admittedly in her innocence she was right. There are four points on the cross. Without missing a beat, I said “very, very, very good! There are four points on the cross. Do you know what the three on the top represent?” I asked. Now no one had their hands raised or had anything clever to say. “They represent what our church next door is named after, the Trinity, and what

we as Christians believe who God is to us: God the Father, God the Son, in his son Jesus Christ, and God the Holy Spirit,” I said. “And we believe that all three are one in the same.”

Whether they understood the words that were coming out of my mouth or not is debatable. But I cannot begin to tell you how refreshing it is to look back and be reminded of the simplicity of those children’s reactions, to that mysterious truth we confess to believe in. There wasn’t any bickering about the existence of the Trinity, nor a hint of debate about Christology or arguments of language used in the Nicene Creed. They heard the truth we proclaim, and they accepted it without needing understanding.

However, for us adults, we need to understand, we need explanation, we need empirical proof. Rather than the simplistic child-like faith Jesus asks us to have, there is history for us to look back at and find our faith anew. Like the fourth century debate between Athanasius and Arius on whether Jesus Christ was really God or not? The Nicene Creed that they argued over said that Jesus was “*begotten* of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father...” In other words, Christ was not made out of nothing “*ex-nihilo*” like we are, but was “*begotten*,” created from the very substance of God. When we look at Jesus the Son, we are looking at God the Father. Jesus is God’s full communication of himself. When we see the Christ, Jesus, we are seeing as much of God as we ever hope to see because this Jew from Nazareth is “of one Being, of one substance with the Father.”

Arius, however, rejected the Nicene Creed’s notion that Jesus was fully divine. His question was, what makes God, God? God is God because God can never be truly or fully understood by humanity. God’s divinity, God’s holiness doesn’t need to extend itself, or communicate itself further than God already has. For God to humble Godself, to extend Godself

and get involved with his creation in the world would be to dirty the perfection of God. It would make God’s hands more human, and therefore more unclean. Thus to Arius, God is so holy and perfect that God is unreachable. God is so perfect, that God is ultimately that far and distant from us.

In other words, for Arius, God is like the cashier clerk at the grocery store who has put up Plexiglas between us. God is like the worker at Chic-Fil-A who has put a table in front of the drive-thru window so that there is separation between our contamination and their goodness. God is like the tape that separates us from one another at least six feet apart, and is not like the doctors, nurses, respiratory therapists, and other health care professionals who are risking their lives to be near those with the disease.

The Trinity is the result of a debate over distance, over nearness. Is Jesus, God, or is he only the middleman? Athanasius rebutted against Arius who said that Christ’s complete dependence on God was proof that Jesus was God. John’s gospel says that everything the Father has, he has given to the Son, because the Father loves the Son, he has given all things to him. The Father holds nothing back from the Son. All the glory that God has got is received by the Son who in turn sends all the glory back to the Father. Its reciprocal. Its cyclical. Its relational. In other words, when we look at the Father, we see the Son, and when we look at the Son, Jesus Christ, we see the Father.

When at the end of my devotion that morning at Trinity, I saw a single little hand raised by another little girl, she must’ve been in the first or second grade. When I called on her she asked, “What about the fourth point at the bottom of the cross? Who is God there?”

“What do you think,” I asked her.

“Me?” she asked.

“Yes” I said. “You, me, all of us.”

Although she and the other children may not have understood what her answer revealed.

It does reveal a lot about how we should look at the cross and understand the nature of the Trinity, especially during these distancing times. Our God is not like the god of Arius, far off and distant, too divine and exalted to be near us, too cold and otherworldly to be understood. Too powerful and mighty to be nailed to a cross to die for us.

No, our God is very much near to us. Our God, understood as the Trinity is affirmation that at the center of it all, God is relationship. Our God suffers in our sufferings. Our God suffers with and in us, and did it willingly on the cross, where all the pain of humanity was taken on by His only Son, Jesus Christ, with the help and guidance of the Comforter and Advocate, the Holy Spirit. All because God loves us. In the image of the cross, we are always at his feet, and always in the conversation of experiencing the cross through the Triune relationship of love.

Very much like that morning with those children when for a moment I had nothing to say, and then suddenly I did. Or in the moment when I was taught something by that little girl about who we are in relation to our Triune God through God’s work on the cross... our God is always reaching out to us, communicating to us, even as the Father is always reaching in and talking toward the Son, and the Son is always praying to the Father, and the Holy Spirit is always reaching toward the Son and the Father. It is the nature and mission of the church to magnetize others into the conversation and the proclamation that our God, our Triune, Trinitarian God is love and wants a relationship with us to love God, the Father, God’s Son, Jesus Christ, and the Comforter, the Holy Spirit and neighbors as ourselves through discipleship-making. That is why today on Trinity Sunday, we read the Great Commission text in the gospel of Matthew:

18 Jesus came near and spoke to them, “I’ve received all authority in heaven and on earth. 19 Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to obey everything that I’ve commanded you. Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age.”

Therefore, may our lives mirror the love of our Triune God. May we not be distant but be near and speak to our neighbors in love. May we continue to be relational so that our hearts are transformed toward unity and oneness in love. May we strive to be communal in our love so that it is infectious and draws others to this holy and mysterious truth.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.