

“3 = 1”

Matthew 28:16-20

Jesus said, *“Whom do people say that I am?”* And his disciples answered and said, *Some say you are John the Baptist returned from the dead; others say Elijah, or another of the old prophets.”* And Jesus answered and said, *But who do you say that I am?”* Peter answered and said, *“Thou art the Logos, existing in the Father as God’s rationality and then, by an act of God’s will, being generated, in consideration of the various functions by which God is related to creation, but only on the fact that Scripture speaks of a Father, and a Son, and a Holy Spirit, each member of the Trinity being coequal with every other member, and each acting inseparably with and interpenetrating every other member, with only an economic subordination within God, but causing no division which would make the substance no longer simple.”* And Jesus answering, said, *“What?”*

Trying to explain the mystery of God and how God’s presence is manifested in Jesus and the Holy Spirit is one of those hard to explain mysteries. Hans Kung, the Swiss theologian, said, *“Doctrines are an attempt to explain mysteries.”* People of faith have tried for a long time to explain the mystery of God in a variety of ways. The doctrine of the Trinity is one of those attempts of Christians to talk about our experience of the presence of God. Today is Trinity Sunday when we talk about God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So, it is appropriate for us to look at how this doctrine can help us in our relationship with God. However, I don’t make any promises that you will understand the Trinity better after this sermon because it is a mystery and mysteries are hard to explain. Barbara Brown Taylor, a Christian theologian, once wrote, *“Perhaps the most faithful sermon on the Trinity is one that sniffs around the edges of the mystery hunting for something closer to an experience than an understanding.”*

As we consider this doctrine as a helpful tool for us in our understanding of our relationship with God, it is important to remember that the doctrine of the Trinity does not appear in the Scriptures, and that it has been contested from time to time by various Christian thinkers. The Trinity wasn’t articulated as such until Tertullian coined the word in the early third century.

The definitive formulations of the Trinity are found in the creeds agreed upon at the First Council of Nicea (in 325 CE) and the Council of Constantinople (in 381 CE). Those statements were composed to combat specific opposing opinions and naturally drew upon the linguistic and philosophical resources available to Greek-speaking communities at the time.

In our Gospel today from Matthew 28, Jesus’ words here are about the closest thing we have to an articulation of the Trinity in the scriptures. Jesus never used the term “Trinity,” and he offered nothing like a doctrine of its nature. His words here let us know that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit exist in a mutual relationship that is a model for us to be in relationship with the world, to live in service and to cultivate community. So, how God is revealed and known to us is about this relationship. As Christians we believe that God is one. Yet, we also believe that community and connections are at the essence of God. These relationships within God’s self are the essence of our own being. The Trinity is the model for our human relationships. It is based on love and not domination. It is based on sharing, giving and receiving love. The Father loves the Son, the Son loves the Father, and the Spirit dwells in the Son and creates with the Creator. Their relationship of love spills over to the world to create, redeem and sustain. The Trinity helps us see the model for relationships, love and power in our world. The Trinity is not about control, greed, domination and fear. And so is our calling in this life.

Father Richard Rohr says that, *“Power and love are not mutually exclusive, but until I unlearn power in its usual form (and it is indeed an unlearning, which Christianity calls conversion), the mysterious event of love will not happen. If the love does happen – a mystery, God-like- that we ‘fall’ into and sometimes decide for, power emerges in a whole new form...what most people call power is just control. When I need to see that actions are done my way, I might have control over passing events, but that is not power in any full sense...letting go of one’s need for control has the potential to empower the whole group, staff, or family.”* So this gives us a practical tool for our lives. If God is about love and mutual connections, so we are called to live in the same Spirit of mutuality with others.

Unfortunately, the great commission which we read this morning from Matthew 28 has been misused by Christians for centuries. Christians have used this commission as a claim that we are superior to others and that our faith and our way of thinking is more civilized and is the only way to experience and know God’s love

and grace. The whole point of the commission is for us to reach out to others in love and invite them into the mystery of our experience of God's love in the relationships of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This was an inclusive call. The followers of Jesus Christ were invited to reach out not just to the Jews but also to all nations! They were called to share about this mystical experience of love and the story of their relationship with God. It was not an invitation to tell others about their certainties, doctrines and beliefs. Sharing our beliefs and doctrines often separates us from others. Sharing our experiences of God's love and our relationship with God opens a door to the heart. Yet, it does not give us simple and clear formats for faith and life because life is a mystery. Pascal once wrote "Every religion that does not affirm that God is hidden is not true."

The story is told of St Augustine of Hippo, a great philosopher and theologian who wanted so much to understand the doctrine of the Trinity and to be able to explain it logically. One day as he was walking along the sea shore and reflecting on this, he suddenly saw a little child all alone on the shore. The child made a hole in the sand, ran to the sea with a little cup, filled her cup, came and poured it into the hole she had made in the sand. Back and forth she went to the sea, filled her cup and came and poured it into the hole. Augustine went up to her and said, "*Little child, what are doing?*" and she replied, "*I am trying to empty the sea into this hole.*" "*How do you think,*" Augustine asked her, "*that you can empty this immense sea into this tiny hole and with this tiny cup?*" To which she replied, "*And you, how do you suppose that with your small head you can comprehend the immensity of God?*" With that the child disappeared.

The Trinity moves us beyond our certainties about our understanding of God. The Trinity is not a mathematical problem without any practical implications. It is not about adding 1+1+1 to make a happy threesome. The Trinity helps us see the world as a circle. The image of God is that of a circle not a hierarchy of domination. The whole universe is about relationships and connections. Whenever we feel alienated, cut off, and lonely, we are away from the flow of God's love. Whenever we judge, control, exploit others we are away from the presence of God. We all exist in this circle of life and need it. The Trinity is our way of knowing God's flow of love in giving and receiving.

Here is a story about how God's love is experienced in the mystery of relationships. In 1980, seven year-old Christopher James Greicius had a wish. He wanted to be a police officer. In April of 1980, that wish came true. Chris was diagnosed with a terminal illness. So he was never going to grow up to fulfill his dream. As his condition worsened, his mother Linda decided to help grant his wish before he ended up back in the hospital. Their friend, U.S. Customs Officer Tommy Austin, had promised Chris a ride in a police helicopter, so he made some calls. On the morning of April 29, 1980, a police helicopter picked Chris up and escorted him to the Arizona Department of Public Safety (taking the scenic route, of course). He was greeted by three police cars and a police motorcycle and had a great time talking with the officers. The officers dubbed him "Bubble Gum Trooper." That day, Bubble Gum Trooper Greicius was sworn in as the first and only honorary Arizona state trooper! The officers were so touched by the boy that Officer Ron Cox called their uniform company to get a custom uniform for Chris. The company, John's Uniforms, was also moved by the story. The company worked overnight to get the uniform ready as soon as possible. On May 1, Chris had his uniform. On May 2, Chris was back in the hospital, but he was so proud about being a patrolman, he asked that his uniform be hung in the window of his room and that his motorcycle helmet be placed on his dresser so he could see them. Officer Frank Shankwitz presented Chris with motorcycle wings to add to his uniform. On May 3, Chris passed away, but not before living his dream. On the plane trip back from the funeral, Officers Scott Stahl and Frank Shankwitz knew how much it meant to Chris to have his wish granted, and how cheerful it made him in his last days. They figured that there must be other ill children out there like Chris. In that moment, the idea of Make-A-Wish was born. Since 1980, the Make-A-Wish Foundation has given hope, strength and joy to thousands of children with life-threatening medical conditions. From their humble beginnings with one boy's wish to be a police officer, they have evolved into an organization that grants a child's wish in the U.S. every 41 minutes.

May we always share in the mystery of God's very own self through our giving and receiving the amazing gift of love in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit! Amen.

Attached: Faith in Action

FAITH IN ACTION

In his *Spiritual Exercises*, St. Ignatius (1491-1556) urged that all be taught the Examen, a daily examination of our deepest feelings and desires. He called these feelings our consolations (what connects us with God, others and ourselves) and desolations (what disconnects us). He believed that God would speak to us through these feelings and desires. It's not surprising that this saint felt so strongly about the Examen -- this prayer practice changed him from a wild soldier to a pilgrim walking barefoot to Jerusalem. The Examen helps us:

- Acknowledge sad or painful feelings and hear how God is speaking to us through them.
- Overcome a pessimistic outlook by encouraging us to notice the good in each day.
- Tell the truth about who we truly are and what we need, rather than who we think we should be.
- Become aware of seemingly insignificant moments that ultimately can give direction for our lives.

Preparation: You may wish to light a candle. Do whatever helps you to experience God's loving presence with you. Take a few deep breaths. Breathe in God's love, and when you breathe out, fill the space around you with it.

STEP ONE

Ask God to bring to your awareness the moment today for which you are most grateful or where you experienced God's presence.

- If you could relive one moment, which one would it be?
- When were you most able to give and receive love today?
- Ask yourself what was said and done in that moment that made it so good.

Breathe in the gratitude you felt and receive life again from that moment.

STEP TWO

Ask God to bring to your awareness the moment today for which you are least grateful or where you felt God to be absent.

- When were you least able to give and receive love?
- Ask yourself what was said and done in that moment that made it so difficult.
- Relive the feelings without trying to change or fix it in any way.

Take deep breaths and let God's love fill you just as you are.

STEP THREE

Be grateful for all that you have experienced.