

WPC
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Holy, Holy, Holy
Isaiah 6: 1-5; Matthew 28:16-20

Today is Trinity Sunday, when we affirm the “beautifully complex, dynamic, and great God who is three-in-one,” (Pulpit Resource, May 22, 2005, 33). Trinity, one God in three persons as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is a complex doctrine which has stumped many of the greatest minds of the church. What Christian doctrine is more incomprehensible than the Trinity? The Trinity is complex because God is complex – no human can totally understand God. John Wesley once said: “Bring me a worm that can comprehend a man and I will show you a man that can comprehend God.”

One of the best selling books in recent years is William P. Young’s book The Shack. It’s a fascinating book about Mack, the protagonist who experiences a horrible family tragedy and who meets God at a shack. But this book shows how confusing it can be to deal with the Trinity.

Young tries admirably in the book to *try* to express the three separate persons of the Trinity - it's just that in doing that part well he can't also keep on top of the oneness of God. Naturally all human attempts to describe God are going to fall short and the goal, presumably, of this particular book was

not to do a 15 volume Augustinian attempt to describe the Trinity... just to try to get across the personal nature of God in these three persons.

So throughout the book, the triune God appears in three human forms. Mack's first encounter, at the front door of the shack, is with Papa, a "large beaming African American woman." He then meets a "small, distinctively Asian woman," named Sarayu, and a Middle Eastern laborer, who is obviously Jesus (83). Mack concludes that "this was a Trinity sort of thing" (87).

It's a fascinating book, but portraying the Trinity as three people, separate from one another, is a misunderstanding of the concept. God is not three separate people; that would be three gods—tritheism. Rather, he's one in essence yet three in person. The persons must be distinguished but never separated. There is only one God, not three different gods.

Although the concept of the Trinity is a great mystery and beyond human comprehension, it's worth our time to try to wrap our minds around this doctrine because "The Trinity is the greatest intellectual achievement of the church, an attempt to come to terms with the reality of the Incarnation, that is, God with us, as one of us, in the flesh, incarnate in Jesus."¹

¹ William Willimon, Pulpit Resource, May 30, 2010, p. 44.

It was one of the church fathers who said, “When we talk about the Trinity, we must forget how to count.” According to William Willimon, this church father was simply recognizing that, at first glance, the Trinity is a mathematical impossibility. After all, how can one equal three? Or three equal one? The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all the same God, not three different gods. So in Trinitarian thought, one plus one plus one equals one!

Augustine had seven statements about God: The Father is God. The Son is God. The Holy Spirit is God. The Son is not the Father. The Father is not the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not the Son. And then, after these six statements, Augustine adds one more. There is only one God.

Willimon believes “we must throw away our math, not because the Trinity is a logical muddle, but because we need a different kind of logic. It took Augustine fifteen books to try to think about it, because God is God and we are not. Because God comes to us with a complexity...that boggles our modest minds, no wonder we have trouble thinking about God. No wonder the Trinity boggles our imaginations. The problem with the Trinity is not that this is a bunch of nonsense, but that God is God, in God’s particularly glorious, effusive way, and we are just people, the recipients of a love so

deep we cannot find words to describe it. When we think about the Trinity, we must forget how to count.”

In Edwin A. Abbott’s story Flatland, A Romance of Many Dimensions, he describes life in a two-dimensional world which is visited by a three-dimensional figure. When the two-dimensional square narrator encounters a three-dimensional sphere, it changes his perception of reality.

Panicked, the square cries, "Either this is madness or it is hell." (p.93) "It is neither," calmly replies the voice of the sphere, "it is knowledge; it is three Dimensions: open your eye once again and try to look steadily." After getting used to the reality into which he has been transported, the square beholds beauty until now only "inferred, conjectured, dreamed." (p. 93)

C.S. Lewis also worked with this kind of logic. In his book Mere Christianity, Lewis talks about the three-personal God:

You know that in space you can move in three ways – to left or right, backwards or forwards, up or down. Every direction is either one of these three or a compromise between them. They are called the three Dimensions. Now notice this. If you are using only one dimension, you could draw only a straight line. If you are using two, you could draw a figure: say, a square. And a square is made up of four straight lines. Now a step further. If you have three dimensions, you can then build what we call a solid body: say, a

cube – a thing like a dice or a lump of sugar. And a cube is made up of six squares.

Do you see the point? A world of one dimension would be a straight line. In a two-dimensional world, you still get straight lines, but many lines make one solid body. In other words, as you advance to more real and more complicated levels, you do not leave behind you the things you found on the simpler levels: you still have them, but combined in new ways – in ways you could not imagine if you knew only the simpler levels.

Now the Christian account of God involves just the same principle. The human level is a simple and rather empty level. On the human level one person is one being and any two persons are two separate beings – just as, in two dimensions (say on a flat sheet of paper) one square is one figure, and any two squares are two separate figures. On the Divine level you still find personalities but up there you find them combined in new ways which we, who do not live on that level, cannot imagine.

In God's dimension, so to speak, you find a being who is three Persons while remaining one Being, just as a cube is six squares while remaining one cube. Of course we cannot fully conceive a Being like that: just as, if we were so made that we perceived only two dimensions in space we could never properly imagine a cube. But we can get a sort of faint

notion of it. And when we do, we are then, for the first time in our lives, getting some positive idea, however faint, of something super-personal – something more than a person. It is something we could never have guessed, and yet, once we have been told, one almost feels one ought to have been able to guess it because it fits in so well with all the things we know already. (Mere Christianity, 138-9)

God is a mystery that is utterly beyond our limited human comprehension. All images and descriptions of God are inadequate; they're too small. "Yet, God is not unknowable. This mystery reaches out to us, constantly seeks to encounter us as the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." (Willimon, Pulpit Resource, May 22, 2005, 34).

What an awesome God we have. Sometimes, we forget the sheer largeness of God. This is the God to whom the seraphs called out, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." This is the God who told Moses, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground" (Ex. 3:5). This is the God who overcame death itself, and who promises his disciples, "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

A number of years ago, a French Canadian movie came out titled *Jesus of Montreal*. I think many people who went to see this film thought

they were going to see some sort of satire on religion. And certainly, there was plenty of that in the movie, which is about a group of actors who are hired by a Catholic church to enact the story of Jesus going to the cross. These actors are not believers – they’re simply hired by the church, given the story, and told to make up the script and perform the drama.

While learning their roles and putting together the production, something strange happens. The actors start becoming the roles they’re playing. The young actor playing Jesus starts looking and acting more like Jesus, and by the end of the movie, he is Jesus.

There’s a lot of humor in this movie. When the actor playing Jesus notes that Jesus must have been crucified in the nude, he plays it in the nude. The priest, of course, gets very upset over this. When a policeman shows up in the middle of the production and arrests the actor for playing Jesus, audiences had a good laugh.

But as the movie progresses, Jesus, or at least the actor playing Jesus, eventually dies in a very self-sacrificial way.

During that scene, audiences were no longer laughing. Many sat in stunned silence. You could feel how the story was effecting the audience. They were no longer feeling ridicule or humor.

William Willimon, when he saw this film, felt that at this point the audience was feeling awe: “Maybe for the first time in a long time, maybe for the first time in their secular little lives, they had been brought into the presence of something very strange; something far removed from their merely personal experience. The sacrificial death of someone who was laying down his life for his friends, a gentle figure who was clearly at odds with so many of the values of our culture. What could they feel but awe?” (Pulpit Resource, May 22, 2005, 34)

I’ve always appreciated that Trinity Sunday is a separate day in the church calendar because it’s good to be reminded that our God is an awesome God: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” “O Lord, Our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (Ps. 8:1) “Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Amen.