



TRINITY: A RULE OF THREES

The common man sees the world as nature sees it,
yes and no, good and evil, on and off –
the artificer, the scholar, the intellectual
sees the world in threes, and makes a full time occupation
of explaining the unnatural – **Attrib. to Kilroy**

Scripture:

Numbers 11

They will help you carry the burden

10. Moses heard the people of every family wailing, each at the entrance to his tent. The LORD became exceedingly angry, and Moses was troubled.
11. He asked the LORD, "Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me?"
12. Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their forefathers?"
13. Where can I get meat for all these people? They keep wailing to me, "Give us meat to eat!"
14. I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me."
- ...
16. The LORD said to Moses: "Bring me seventy of Israel's elders who are known to you as leaders and officials among the people. Have them come to the Tent of Meeting, that they may stand there with you.
17. I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take of the Spirit that is on you and put the Spirit on them. They will help you carry the burden of the people so that you will not have to carry it alone."

Matthew 28

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit

16. Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go.
17. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.
18. Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.
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. and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

NICAEA

Christian Bishops from around the Mediterranean Sea assembled in a resort on the waterway that leads to the Black Sea. They had assembled to rule on profound questions that had emerged in the two centuries since the death of Jesus. During this two-hundred years, Christians had emerged from meeting underground (literally) and in private homes to being declared the official religion of the Roman Empire that was now governed by Constantine. The Bishops were wined and dined by Emperor Constantine in a resort town called Nicaea. We read parts of the document they produced this morning, the Nicene Creed.

One of their most important questions was, "Who did Jesus pray to?" It sounds simple, but it is really quite complex.

- If Jesus was God, did Jesus pray to himself?

- When did Jesus become God; and when did Jesus become the Christ?
- What does it mean to baptize new converts in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit?

And the Nicene Creed was their answer.

THINKING IN THREES

The only way to explain it was to realize that in order to understand God, you have to think in threes, not twos. God wants us to think in threes. God the Father, Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit within us, was their answer. God is like a triangle with three strong sides; God is like a shamrock that is one, and yet has three leaves. The Egyptians often spoke of God as a family of three (Isis, Osiris, Re). It

already made sense to think of a Triune God, and the Council made it part of Christian doctrine.

All you have to do this morning is remember to think in three's, not twos.

WHY IS THAT A BIG DEAL?

It's a big deal because there are many who only think in twos. They believe that the great decisions in the world are either black or white. They say that their decisions are between good and evil. World leaders have said you are either with us or you are against us.

Thinking in twos is a roadmap to disaster.

God wants us to think in threes, not twos. That is one of the most important foundational statements of the Christian Church. To understand culture we think in terms of action, reaction and synthesis; creator, redeemer, sustainer; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We call it the Trinity and this understanding of the cosmos is basic to Christianity. The world in which we live is filled with a million colors, not just two. This is nothing new. The world has always been filled with a million colors.

EXAMPLES ARE EVERYWHERE.

- **What should be the punishment for a crime?** The law says that punishment depends upon whether the crime is a felony, a misdemeanor, a first, second, or third degree action. The law differentiates between legal and illegal behaviors in hundreds of different ways. People who understand the many different ways in which the law works make a lot of money. Black and white does not describe the legal system.
- **What race are you?** It is unlikely that anyone in this room is not a mixture of ancestors that come from all over the globe. In twenty years, in forty years, the mixture will be even greater, and that question will be nearly impossible to answer.
- **How smart are you?** Intelligence can be measured in dozens of different ways from literary to mathematical, to emotional intelligence, artistic, musical, intelligence in languages, athletic intelligence, and dexterities of all kinds. Most kinds of intelligence cannot be measured by testing.
- **Where was your car made?** Check under the hood; it was made in lots of places. How much of your car needs to be from the same place to qualify for citizenship? Your furniture, your food, your clothing – where do they come from and how many buttons does it need to say that it is American, Chinese, Vietnamese, or German?

DUALITY DOES NOT DESCRIBE OUR THEOLOGY.

Our scripture today says that we should reach out to people and bring them to God. How? You shall reach out

and baptize in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. And that has nothing to do with good and evil.

TRIANGULAR NAVIGATION

Yesterday, Peter Maier, our Pastor of Visitation, and I did something we don't do very often. We went for a ride with Tim Slater. We returned home safely because Tim and his co-pilot think in threes (and sometimes as many as sixteens) before they make decisions about where they want to go.

Peter and I had been visiting with people at the Festival in Bowen Hall when Tim came in to bring his son, Jacob, to his wife, Lynn, after lunch. Tim needed to be in Oakland in about an hour, and he asked Peter and me if we would like to take a short ride with him.

"What kind of ride did you have in mind?" we asked.

"About a hundred miles." Tim was performing a test flight for a Gulfstream G-3 corporate jet because the left engine had been recently overhauled, and they wanted to make a final check of the engine before placing the plane back into service. Tim said he would be flying out of Oakland, vectoring east toward Concord and completing a short loop that would return to the airport in about 30 minutes. It didn't take either of us long to decide that we wanted to take a ride with Tim.

At the airport, Tim conferred with the mechanics, the Rolls Royce technician, and his co-pilot to be sure all systems were ready. In just a few short moments, Peter and I had been transformed into parts of a precision team of courageous test pilots whose mission was to push the edge of the envelope to the very frontiers of flight. We were ready to help Tim test the plane in any way we could.

In the process of our testing, we talked about triangulation with his aeronautics technician. Modern navigation is based upon processing radio signals from at least three sources, and often as many as sixteen sources, so that you can determine exactly where you are. The navigator triangulates our position. If a pilot relied upon only two sources, he would never have any idea where he is. Navigation is done by triangulation.

In fact, our airplane had three radio systems, triple back ups for hydraulics, triple redundancy for electrical and almost anything in it. When I learned about triangulation, I determined right then and there that I would never fly with anyone who only believed in only two reference points. He would have no idea how to get me safely home.

THE TRINITY

Last summer, the Presbyterian Church adopted a new paper on the Trinity. The Presbyterian Church wants you to think in threes, not twos. I have some excerpts from a paper on the Trinity that was adopted in Birmingham last June, and I think we will be surprised how logical it is for Presbyterians to triangulate their theology. Our church says no one can reduce the most important decisions of life to "you are either for me or against me."

SPEAKING OF THE TRIUNE GOD

We speak of God in terms of the Trinity....The divine attributes are held in common by all three persons: all are holy, all are loving, all are wise and powerful. Similarly, an action of God cannot be restricted to one of the three persons. All of the acts of the Triune God are indivisible. The persons of the Trinity do not work independently. Each of God's acts is always the one work of the whole Trinity.

For example, while the first person of the Trinity is often referred to as the "Creator," this must not be understood to exclude the involvement of the second and the third persons in the work of creation. Thus while the triad "Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier" appropriately describes distinct aspects of God's relationship to the world, it does not designate the relationships of the Triune persons to each other. In the life of the Triune God the three persons are uniquely distinguished and uniquely united by their mutual relationships. Each person gives and receives love from the others in a distinctive way.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) affirms and values this way of speaking of the Triune God, resisting any tendency to discard or diminish it.

AS WE EXPLORE DIVERSE POSSIBILITIES FOR TRINITARIAN IMAGES, WE ARE MINDFUL OF THE TEMPTATION TO BRING THE MYSTERY OF GOD UNDER OUR CONTROL. THEREFORE, WE MUST ALWAYS BE GUIDED BY THE WORDS OF SCRIPTURE AND CREEDS THAT SPEAK OF GOD AS FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT.

EXAMPLES

Female imagery of the Triune God has yet to be adequately explored. The overflowing love of God finds expression in the biblical depiction of God

- as compassionate mother (Isaiah 49:15; 66:13),
- beloved child (Matthew 3:17),
- and life-giving womb (Isaiah 46:3).

Recognizing that all language about the Triune God refers beyond itself by way of analogy, we draw on scripture and our confessions to speak of the Triune God in historically faithful yet freshly imaginative ways.

TRIADS

Some triads have a narrative quality; others are drawn from creation. Three guidelines have been followed: in each case the three terms must have an inner relationship; ... Functional Trinitarian language should be understood to amplify and enrich our understanding of God - it cannot replace personal language.

While classical Trinitarian theology speaks of the "first, second, and third" persons of the Trinity, scripture also refers to the three in other patterns, as in the apostolic benediction which invokes "the grace of the Lord Jesus

Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit." (2 Corinthians 13:13)

As we read, proclaim, hear, and live out the message of scripture, the Triune God is known to us as

- Speaker,
- Word,
- and Breath (Hebrews 1:1; John 1:1; John 20:22; Psalm 104:30).

As we worship, the Triune God is

- the One *from* Whom,
- the One *through* Whom,
- and the One *in* Whom we offer our praise (Romans 11:36).

As we seek God's grace and wholeness, acknowledging the sin and brokenness in us, our human communities, and the whole creation, the Triune God is

- our Rainbow of Promise,
- our Ark of Salvation,
- and our Dove of Peace (From Gail Ramshaw, *Koinonia: Services and Prayer* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2004).

In baptism, the Triune God is for us

- Overflowing Font,
- Living Water,
- Flowing River (*Book of Common Worship*, p.412; John 4:10, 13-14; John 7:37).

As we offer ourselves, our resources, and our gratitude in stewardship and Eucharist, the Triune God is

- Giver,
- Gift, and
- Giving (James 1:17; John 3:16; 2 Corinthians 9:15; 1 John 3:24).

In celebrating the communion of our life together in Christ, the Triune God is

- Lover,
- Beloved,
- And the Love that binds together Lover and Beloved (Augustine, *The Trinity*).

As members of the believing community, we acknowledge the Triune God as

- our Rock,
- Cornerstone,
- and Temple (Psalm 28:1; Ephesians 2:20-21).

As we seek to live in faith, love, and hope, the Triune God is for us

- the One Who Was,
- the One Who Is,
- and the One Who Is To Come (Revelations 4:8).

Of course the Birmingham newspaper reduced this piece of work to absurdity saying, the Presbyterian Church now believes that God is mother, child and womb. Nothing could be further from the truth.

THERE ARE MANY APPLICATIONS

**MY CAMERA CAN CAPTURE MILLIONS OF
SUBTLE CHANGES IN COLOR IN CREATING
PICTURES OF OUR BEAUTIFUL LANDSCAPE;
WE SHOULD BE NO LESS CAPABLE
IN IMAGING GOD.**

The difference between black and white is the third eye of synthesis.

Politicians these days say the issues are black and white. But now we are hearing talk about a need for a third political party, and there is talk of a synthesized party emerging – perhaps too late. There are many who feel that neither of the major parties fully represents us, and leadership needs to understand the need to negotiate and fully discuss the complex issues of our times.

I asked you a moment ago if you knew what race you are. There are thousands of genetic variations even in the same race. Reducing life to two categories is absolutely meaningless in building multicultural neighborhoods.

We do not live in a world that is divided into Christian and Jew. That represents less than one-third of the world's population, and does not account for variations within the denominations themselves. It is a waste of time.

Santa Rosa is far more complex than to think of ourselves as a small city divided in half by a freeway.

SOCIAL SCHEME

Some talk about the understanding of culture as a triad:

- **Tradition:** Religion, cultural habits, and family relationships.
- **Market:** Goods (moveable), property (fixed or real), and trade (money system).
- **Power:** Internal controls (police), group protection (military), and government structure (legal).

Others have said that there are at least three types of truth:

- **Absolute Truth:** This is the truth of religion. Unfortunately, to paraphrase Jean-Paul Sartre, God does not telephone you and tell you of its nature. As a result, there are thousands of opinions as to what constitutes God's absolute truth.
- **Relative Truth:** Science. This discipline can only measure relationships.
- **Legal Truth:** The notion that "truth" is discovered within a framework of legislated rules and precedence. Judgments are then made to imprison, confiscate, and label.

AND HOW DO WE ARRIVE AT THE "TRUTH"

All human beings use the following three methods to gather information:

- **Experience:** Experience is what gives value to decision. Every person's experience is different from every other person's. Psychology attempts to catalog experience and has had some success in the *statistics* of marketing, but has never been shown to be able to predict a specific individual's future behavior.
- **Observation:** Science has formalized this method of information gathering. Experience clearly has a critical role in determining what will be studied through the process of decision, but once this has been determined, everything possible is done to prevent experience, now called *bias*, from clouding observation and the interpretation of that observation. Unlike experience, which is *unique* to the individual, the formalized observation of the scientific method has, ideally, a set of protocols that can be shared among observers.
- **Authority:** This is simply accepting the experiences and observations of others. Science has a formal way of deciding whose authority to accept. It largely avoids the authority of experience, since it is nearly impossible to pinpoint and measure. Absolutists, on the other hand, accept and welcome the authority of experience. Religious knowledge can, ultimately, only come through this method. Authority should not be dismissed out-of-hand as a useful tool. Obviously, we don't want to repeat all the learning of previous generations, nor do we want to lose the moral teachings of a Gandhi. But it is important to be wary of everyone who claims to speak for God.

YESTERDAY I LEARNED SOMETHING IMPORTANT TO SURVIVAL

- Never fly with anyone who does not understand the importance of triangulation in determining where you are. It is just too dangerous.
- Look for leaders who can draw the world with more than two crayons, and whose art work shows more than angels and demons.
- Take a walk down your street this week and think about the seasons. Sonoma County has so many wonderful shades of green in the spring that are so iridescent that you can hardly describe them to someone who hasn't seen them. In the fall, maroons, oranges and yellows create vineyards that are luscious beyond imagination; and golden fields in the summer shimmer in the sun. Don't try to photograph Sonoma County with a black and white camera.
- And don't be a Presbyterian who forgets the importance of the Trinity in understanding the Triune God who is the creator, redeemer and sustainer of life itself.



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