

WGUMC   Trinity Sunday   June 11, 2017   New Math

There was once a secular Jew who was an avowed atheist. But he sent his son to Trinity School, despite its sectarian roots, because it had the best reputation in town. After a month, his son came home and said casually, "By the way, Dad, I learned what "Trinity" means. It means 'The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.'" The father was caught off guard and looked alarmed. He took the boy by the shoulders and said sternly, "Son, I'm going to tell you something very important. You've got to forget this Trinity business. There is only one God... and we don't believe in him!"

Yes, it's Trinity Sunday, the day pastors try to say something that isn't too ridiculous about the one doctrine in the church that is totally mysterious. You gotta wonder where we got the idea that God is Father and God is Son and God is Spirit and the Father is not the Son and the Son is not the Father and neither Father nor Son is the Spirit but somehow

the Three are One.

It would be nice if it were all laid out in the Bible, but it isn't. The end of the Gospel of Matthew is one of the few times that the Trinitarian formula is used: "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." From the earliest days, Christians were baptized in the Three Names. So, you could say that the earliest Christians were practicing the Trinity. Early believers experienced God as Father, God as Son, and God as Spirit. But that is not the same as saying that Christians had a very clear concept of the Trinity.

The Apostles' Creed is one early summary of the faith. It talks about believing in the Father and the Son and the Spirit. But there is no explanation of how that equals believing in one God. The Nicene Creed is later and longer, but no more helpful. The truth is that fancy theological formulations don't do much for us. If we really wanted to define the Trinity, we would need a very simple, very universal and very precise kind of language.

And there is no language more precise, more universal, more fundamental than math.

Using the language of math, any kid would tell you that the Trinity doesn't add up:  $1+1+1 \neq 1$ . At least I hope our kids know that. But for the kids in the congregation today, I have to say that you can't talk about the Trinity like it's an addition problem. We aren't adding up gods here. I think that the Trinity is more like a multiplication problem.  $1+1+1 \neq 1$ , but  $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$ . And I think there's some deep God truth in that equation. You could say that there is a multiplicity in God. So with the help of multiplication, you get a certain complexity in God, a diversity, but still a unity. So, you see, as we advance through school, the math gets more interesting and so does God.

But pretty soon, we get bored with multiplication. So lets move on to geometry. How could we explain God in the language of geometry? One traditional symbol of the Trinity is a triangle: three equal sides, one symmetrical figure.

Sometimes, you'll see a triangle inscribed in a circle or a circle inside a triangle. That suggests that there are three "sides" to God but all of them are encircled by the one eternal reality. I rather like that symbol. When Hank and I got married, we had a local artist in Eugene make us wedding bands. I wanted a yogo sapphire (from the yogo mine in Montana) instead of a diamond, and we both wanted a symbol of the Trinity on our ring. So we have matching rings each with a triangular stone set in a circle.

What I like about this geometric symbol of the trinity is that it preserves the element of mystery. You can measure the sides of a triangle. They are straight and some things about God are pretty straightforward. But measuring the circumference of a circle is a different matter. The circumference is the diameter of the circle multiplied by the number  $\pi$ . The problem is that we don't know exactly what  $\pi$  is because it is an irrational number. It can't be expressed as a

fraction of whole numbers. And that means that you can't write it as a decimal either. Machines have now computed the number  $\pi$  to a trillion decimal places. The string of numbers never ends and never repeats: 3.1415926535879... So  $\pi$  is an irrational number because it goes beyond the power of human reason to calculate or comprehend it. And God is a lot like that, too.

Going a little further,  $\pi$  is also a transcendent number, which means that we can't put other numbers together to come up with it. We can't mathematically construct  $\pi$ . In geometry, that means that we can't square the circle. We can't make a square that has exactly the same area that any given circle has. In theology, that means that we can't construct God out of any ideas or definitions that we can make, any measurements that we can take.

I like this geometrical symbol of the Trinity, it reminds me of what we can and can't know about God. We can know the

three sides of the triangle. We can know God as Father-Mother-Creator. We can know God as Son, Brother, Savior. We can know God as Spirit, Presence, Power. But we cannot know how Father, Son and Spirit are One.

To get anywhere close, we'll need some higher math, because we are going to need the concept of infinity to understand the nature of divinity. Now things start to add up. God the Father-Mother, God the Son, and God the Spirit: each is infinite and you can never have more than infinity. If you remember when you went from geometry to analysis in high school, you know that arithmetic starts to get funny: infinity+infinity+infinity=infinity.

That sounds like  $1+1+1=1$ . But I don't care so much if you can understand it. I only want you to be able to experience it. Even if we can't explain the Trinity, we can still experience it. What does infinity feel like? If you are a drop of water, infinity is an ocean. If you are a grain of sand, infinity is the Sahara. If

you are a person, infinity is God. And the only way to experience God who has no limit is to come face to face with our own limits. But when we are in the presence of God who is everything, we no longer need to be anything.

To experience the fullness of Trinity, you have to let all your definitions go. You have to let all your defenses down. This is probably only going to happen when life knocks you around. You have to be under enough stress, in enough of a crisis that you are willing to give up your everyday perceptions and walk off into that dark night and stare off into space until you feel like you are standing in that scary place that teeters between everything and nothing. You have to come to a turning point, a decision point. Some call it a crossroad; for Jesus, it was a cross. That's where Jesus experienced the Trinity as he gave up his spirit and his flesh bled into infinity.

The cross marks the boundary between time and eternity. The cross is where Christians can experience the Trinity: where

we confront God the Father-Mother loving us through God the Son who is giving us God the Spirit by pouring into us the life of the Three-in-One. It takes a lot of living and a lot of praying, usually a lot of sinning and a lot of seeking, before we begin to master this new kind of math. But our God is a very patient teacher.

And as any good teacher will tell you, even though school is out for the summer, you've got to keep up with your math. If you don't like it, aren't good at it, just remember the little boy who had so much trouble with arithmetic that his parents were having to fight him, practically had to sit on him, to do his homework every night. Exasperated, his parents finally pulled him out of public school and enrolled him in a catholic school, hoping he would get a better education. In just a few short weeks, he was showing remarkable improvement in his math scores. They said to him, "Son, we just don't get it. How come you are doing so much better? Why don't we have to hound

you to do your homework anymore?" And he said to them, "Well, on the first day of class, I looked up at the front of the room and saw that guy nailed to a plus sign and I figured they really meant business."

The guy nailed to a cross indeed has a business and that is showing us the Way to God, teaching us the Truth of God and leading us into the Life of God. Then the Trinity will be our reality. May the love of God, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.