

**Trinity Talk: One-in-Three**  
**2 Cor 13: 11-13; Ephesians 4: 4-6**

If you were to define God, what words would you use? I ask that question in context of today's sermon on the doctrine of Trinity. I'm sure a lot of us here, like many other Christians wonder why we even spend time focusing on this ancient doctrine. I believe taking time to intentionally and thoughtfully examine the doctrine of Trinity is absolutely crucial to our understanding of the nature and character of God.

Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, the first woman to have been ordained a rabbi in Reconstructionist Judaism, has written a wonderful children's book called *In God's Name*. This book affirms the need to call God by many names: *Source of Life – Creator of Light – Maker of Peace – Mother – Father – Friend*. We call God by many names because we recognize the limits of our human language and that our lived experience of God is so diverse that no ONE name for God can capture the fullness of God. The composer Brian Wren wrote a beautiful hymn called "Bring Many Names." The lyrics speak of: "Strong mother God, *working* night and day, planning all the wonders of creation"; "Warm father God, *hugging* every child, feeling all the strains of human living"; "Young, growing God, *eager*, on the move, crying out for justice"; So, in our worship, we bring many names for God.

Within Christianity, the most common expression of the Trinity is expressed as Three-in-One, One-in-Three. Sounds like the 3 Musketeer's motto: "All for one and one for all!" Putting words to that distinction the church fathers who proposed this doctrine in the 4<sup>th</sup> century chose to designate the Trinitarian Formula as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There is no doubt, however, that this designation is both hierarchical and patriarchal. And the major problem flowing out of this is that the Christian Church itself, following the culture of its day, also became obsessed with hierarchy and patriarchy – top down and male dominated. This approach has had profound and oftentimes devastating political, religious and social consequences especially for women.

A theology student said he remembered the first time he became aware of just how difficult and obscure the doctrine of the Trinity can be. He said that as a teenager growing up in the Roman Catholic Church, he was asked to recite the Athanasian Creed. When he got to the part which

reads, *The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible*, he muttered, too loudly to the horror of those around him, “Geez! The whole damn thing is incomprehensible!” Yes it’s funny but it does express a general feeling among many Christians, you and I included. ‘Trinity’ is incomprehensible indeed! Over the years, people come up with images and ideas to illustrate the Trinity. “Trinity is like an egg: shell, albumen and yoke, one thing.” How about this, “Trinity is like a three leaf clover: three leaves, one clover.” Or THIS, “Trinity is like water: three forms (ice, steam, liquid) as one substance.” Or this - the Trinity is like a man who is simultaneously a father, son and husband. But the funniest I’ve ever heard was this: Trinity is like 3-in-1 shampoo: shampoo, conditioner body wash, one substance.”

At this point it is helpful to remember theologian Elizabeth Johnson’s comments that “The New Testament...contains no full-blown doctrine of the Trinity...nor does the word ‘Trinity’ even appear.” A bit of history here. It was not until almost 200 years after Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians that the Christian apologist Tertullian, writing in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century, attempted to apply the Greek word “Trinity” to Christian theology. And it was yet another century before the doctrine of the Trinity was more fully formulated at the Council of Nicaea in 325 and the Council of Constantinople in 381. In other words, it was 350 years after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus before Christians were able to articulate a full-fledged doctrine of the Trinity similar to that confessed by orthodox Christians today. During those three centuries, there were also many other diverse ways that Christians understood their experiences with God besides the threefold pattern that eventually became the orthodox position.

A problem that may arise in our understanding of the Trinity is the fact that we see the Trinitarian God as a person. We were taught that Trinity is God in Three persons – this is what we profess in hymns like Holy, Holy, Holy or in the ancient creeds that we recite. Theologian Marcus Borg suggests the Latin and Greek word “persona” translated as ‘person’ do not mean what ‘person’ most commonly means in English. For us, ‘person’ means a separate being. But ‘persona’ in the ancient texts refers to the mask worn by actors in Greek and Roman theatres. And then these words from Borg caught my imagination: “To speak of one God and three persons is to say that God is known to us wearing three different ‘masks’... in three different

roles” (*Borg 1997:98*). Indeed a Holy mystery. A multifaceted sacredness creating, indwelling, sustaining, resisting, recreating, challenging, guiding, liberating, completing. Borg suggests that when we step away from a literalist understanding, ‘Trinity’ shows that God is not a distant being but is near at hand. God is not primarily a lawgiver and judge but the compassionate one. And the religious life is not about requirements, but about relationship.

So where does that leave us in terms of understanding the doctrine of the Trinity in our day and age?

In her book, *She Who Is*, the theologian Elizabeth Johnson traces the origin of Trinitarian thinking to early Christians especially those who follow Paul’s teachings, who, she writes: *experienced the saving God in a threefold way as God beyond them, God with them, and God within them, that is, as utterly transcendent, as present historically in the person of Jesus, and as present in the Spirit within their community. These were all encounters with only one God. Accordingly, they began to talk about God in this threefold pattern: “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” Early Christian letters and gospels are filled with this threefold cadence that appears in hymns, greetings, confessions of faith, liturgical formulas, doxologies, and short rules of faith.... In the process, the monotheistic view of God flexed to incorporate Jesus and the Spirit.... Their language expanded creatively to accommodate their threefold religious experience.*

In Paul’s teachings, he emphasized how the early Christians “experienced God in a threefold way.” They believed in one monotheistic God, but they experienced this one God in at least three particular ways: “beyond them, with them, and within them.” I think this is one of the many ways we could address this doctrine of Trinity in this day and age.

Like the early Christians, we experience a transcendent God who is beyond us. This means that the fullness of God is beyond our language, beyond our knowledge, and beyond our experience. In the Song of Faith, we profess that God is Holy Mystery. But this does not mean that we should sit comfortably and say – I do not need to explain this because mystery is mystery. I think we are making a big mistake if we ignore to understand and unearth this Holy Mystery in our midst. The best way to do this is naming God that speaks to our own lived

experience. When I was about 5 years old, I imagine the vast ocean as God – with fishes and shells and corals underneath and the beautiful waves that kiss the shore. Through the years, I’ve added more to the mysteriousness of God by embracing more liberal, unorthodox concept. God is like a tree – with branches and leaves and flowers and fruits – yet it is one huge tree. God is a positive energy giving life to all creation. Do not be afraid to use metaphors when you talk about God. Such is the beauty of expanding our thoughts and understanding of challenging doctrines like the Trinity.

We also experience God as with us, “as present historically in the person of Jesus.” This became known as the Incarnation: that Jesus embodied the ways of God in his life. Overtime, because his followers saw the ways of God so clearly in his life, this itinerant Jewish rabbi known as Jesus of Nazareth, became known by some as Jesus the Christ. And, at the same time that we experience God as *beyond us* and *with us*, we also experience God as within us, “as present in the Spirit within our community.” So, although there was a transcendent aspect of God that would always be *beyond* our experience and even after Jesus was no longer physically *with us*, we still experienced the immanence – the closeness – of God that is, as Wren writes, “closer yet than breathing.” They called this aspect of God “Holy Spirit.”

So here’s my challenge for you as you ponder on Trinity in your own personal reflection. How do you respond to the traditional language of Father, Son, Holy Spirit? Do they resonate with you or disturb you? What feelings, thoughts, or memories emerge in response to these metaphors? What about Augustine’s one of twenty attempts at alternative Trinitarian language: “Lover, Beloved, Love.” In this rubric, God is the Lover and Jesus is the Beloved, following the proclamation from God at Jesus’ baptism that, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11 and parallels). The Spirit, in turn, is Love: the manifestation and bond of love between God the Lover and Christ the Beloved. Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Lover, Beloved, Love. Or what about the position of Hildegard of Bingen, the 11th century theologian and mystic, who imaged Trinity in grand metaphorical style: A brightness, a flashing forth, and a fire. And the three are one.

Rex Hunt, a progressive theologian beautifully comments that the mystery of the livingness of God in a wondrous community... a creative energy beyond, a compassionate traveller with, and

an empowering friendship within, connecting ‘all creation’ together. The essence of God is to be in mutual relation...A mystery of dynamic communion of connectedness. A dancing and celebrating Emmanuel.

Let me close with an excerpt of a poem, originally written in the Old Irish language, that was turned into a Christian hymn. The choir had sung this earlier. It’s attributed to St. Patrick during his Irish ministry in the 5th century called St Patrick’s Breastplate:

I bind unto myself today The strong Name of the Trinity, by invocation of the same The Three in One and One in Three. Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me, Christ beside me, Christ to win me, Christ to comfort and restore me. Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ in quiet, Christ in danger, Christ in hearts of all that love me, Christ in mouth of friend and stranger. I bind unto myself the Name, The strong Name of the Trinity, By invocation of the same, The Three in One and One in Three. Amen.

#### Sources:

Rev. Todd B. Freeman, <http://collegehilltulsa.org>  
Carl Gregg, [patheos.org](http://patheos.org)  
Rex Hunt, <http://www.rexaehuntprogressive.com>  
Wesley Hill, Paul & The Trinity  
BCUC Lectionary Group