

“Truth-in-Three”

John 16: 12-15

You all know me as Kim – a minister, a teacher, a mother. I am a daughter, a sister, a wife. I describe myself as an empowerer, a lover, a friend. Three distinct words for one: “me”. Not three Kims. Only one Kim. There is a famous Norwegian proverb that says, "All good things come in threes." According to Bible professor Alyce Mackenzie, the rule of three is a principle suggesting that things that come in threes are inherently more satisfying, or more effective, or more complete. A series of three often creates a story of progression from beginning to end. We have stories like The Three Little Pigs, Three Blind Mice, Goldilocks and the Three Bears. We watch sitcoms like Three’s Company and listen to songs by Three Dogs Night. We do things in 3’s - eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner, with a knife, fork, and spoon. We hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil. We play rock, paper, scissors. We sing hymns like Holy, Holy, Holy or Three Things I Promise. We generally look at time like yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Even our traffic lights may be red, yellow, or green.

If you were to describe God, what words would you use? The first woman to have been ordained as a rabbi in Reconstructionist Judaism is Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, who wrote a children’s book called In God’s Name. The book affirms the need to call God by many names: Source of Life – Creator of Light – Maker of Peace – My Rock – Ancient One – Mother – Father – Friend. Sasso urges us to use various names for God. They are the windows of our lived experience of who God is in our lives.

We Christians have inherited a doctrine that speaks of God in three persons known as the doctrine of the Trinity. But do we really know the meaning of this God-in-three persons? And if we understand this doctrine of Trinity, does it really matter as we go about our life in faith? So, what do we do with this archaic doctrine that was passed on to us by the church fathers of the 4th century? Do we really need to embrace this particular doctrine of faith? Are we allowed to debate it, discuss it, wrestle with it, or even question its relevance? I believe that taking time to intentionally and thoughtfully re-examine the doctrine is absolutely crucial to our understanding of the nature and character of God. And yes, we are certainly on the right track to discuss it, wrestle with it or even disagree with it.

It is helpful to remember that nowhere in the New Testament does the word Trinity appear. A bit of history here. The Christian apologist Tertullian, writing in the early 3rd 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 debated and formulated at the Council of Nicaea in 325 and the Council of Constantinople in 381. In other words, it would take 350 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus before early Christians, particularly the Church Fathers, were able to articulate a full-fledged doctrine of the Trinity. 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. And here we are in the 21st century- still trying to understand what Trinity could mean for us today.

The church fathers who proposed this doctrine chose to designate the Trinitarian God 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. Over the years, people came up with images and ideas to illustrate the meaning of Trinity.

“Trinity is like an egg: shell, albumen and yoke- one thing.”

“Trinity is like a three-leaf clover: three leaves, one clover.”

“Trinity is like water: three forms (ice, steam, liquid) as one substance.”

But the funniest I’ve ever heard is this: “Trinity is like 3-in-1 shampoo: shampoo, conditioner, and body wash.”

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 in church, particularly in Sunday School, that Trinity is God in Three Persons – this is what we profess in the hymns like Holy, Holy, Holy or in the ancient creeds that some of us still recite. The late NT scholar Marcus Borg suggested that the Latin and Greek word “persona” translated as ‘person’ does not mean what ‘person’ most commonly means in English. Today, a ‘person’ means a separate being. But ‘persona’ in the ancient texts refers to the mask worn by actors in Greek and Roman theatres. Borg’s

comments caught my imagination: “To speak of one God and three persons is to say that God is known to us by wearing three different ‘masks’... in three different roles” (Borg 1997:98). Borg suggests that when we step away from a literalist understanding, ‘Trinity’ shows that God is not about requirements, but about relationships.”

In our Gospel reading today in John, Jesus, in his final discourse to his disciples, promised them the Spirit of Truth known as paraclete, which is a Greek word for advocate or comforter or companion. Knowing that his days were numbered, Jesus encouraged his disciples not to despair or feel abandoned when he leaves this world, because the Spirit of Truth will come to empower, inspire, comfort and encourage them. It sounds like the Spirit seen this way, is docile, tamed and unperturbed. I don’t know about how you understand the language of John, but if I look deeper into the meaning of paraclete as advocate and comforter, I feel that John is not very far from Luke’s image of the chaotic, noisy, undomesticated, violent-driven Pentecost Spirit. Come to think of it - the Holy Spirit as an Advocate prompts the disciples to be living witnesses and testifiers of the truth. They become truth-tellers. They shake things up. And we know that Jesus got himself killed when he spoke truth to power. The Spirit of Truth empowers the disciples to offer disruptive, life-changing testimony that might even lead them to lose their lives. The Johannine community refers to God as the One who created and loves the world and the same God incarnated through Jesus, and the Spirit that gives life. Like the early Christians, we may 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.

So here’s my challenge for you as you reflect on this doctrine of Trinity. What is your personal understanding of the word Trinity? How would you name God? How do you respond to the traditional language of the father, son and the Holy Spirit? Are you comfortable with these words? What feelings, thoughts, or memories emerge in response to these metaphors? For me, I define the doctrine of the Trinity as a word that denotes connectedness or relationships. It encompasses God as a creative energy, present in Jesus - a just companion in our journey and alive in a community through the Spirit of mutual trust and friendship. I also embrace Augustine’s one of many attempts at alternative Trinitarian language: “Lover, Beloved, Love.” God is the Lover, Jesus is the Beloved, and the Spirit is Love. When we acknowledge a loving

God, following the teachings of Jesus the beloved, who promotes the Spirit of love, imagine what the world will be like. A world where hatred and violence will be no more, where we are able to embrace others as our sister or brother, no matter what colour of skin, no matter what status in life, no matter what creed one professes.

On June 10th, the United Church of Canada celebrated its 97th anniversary of church union professing its Trinitarian stance in the Song of Faith:

"With the Church through the ages, we speak of God as one and triune:

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We also speak of God as

Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer

God, Christ, and Spirit

Mother, Friend, and Comforter

Source of Life, Living Word, and Bond of Love,

and in other ways that speak faithfully of

the One on whom our hearts rely,

the fully shared life at the heart of the universe.

We witness to Holy Mystery, that is Wholly Love. "

Thanks be to God. Amen!

Sources:

Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is*.

BCUC Lectionary Group

Alyce Mackenzie, patheos.org

Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*

UCC Song of Faith