

A Sermon Preached

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“It’s a mystery.”

That phrase was forbidden in my theology classes during seminary - until the last 10 minutes of class. I can understand why - our professor, Ellen Wondra, wanted us to grapple with huge issues, to find our way into, and through, them - to construct substantiated arguments for or against particular ways of understanding God. Saying that it was a mystery, while true, in the end, killed the discussion - it was the divine trump card that nobody could argue with. Because, ultimately, we *can't* fully understand God in this life.

Well, I’m here to say, again, that it’s a mystery. (And from that I hope you can take certain comfort that we have now entered the last 10 minutes of my sermon.)

Today marks the day that the Episcopal Church recognizes as Trinity Sunday. We don’t have a great deal of hard doctrine in our tradition - there is no set of convictions that people have to sign off on, in order to call themselves Episcopalian. We have scripture, and we have the Prayer Book. And we have a saying in our church that I love: “we believe what we pray”. One of the prayers we pray each Sunday, and at every baptism and confirmation, is a creed that says something about who we believe God to be:

One God, three persons. God the Father, who created all that is, seen and unseen. God the Son, who is eternally begotten of the Father, who was carried into this world by a woman, who was crucified, died, was resurrected and ascended. God the Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who speaks through the Prophets. Three persons. One God. All perfectly clear, right?

I admit, it's hard to comprehend all this. And our minds, which we affirm each week were created by God, are curious: it is our nature to seek understanding. So we develop metaphors, using things we *do* understand and placing them alongside the mysterious. The Trinity is like a tree: root, trunk, branches. The Trinity is like a candle: flame, wick, wax. The Trinity is like time: past, present, future. The Trinity is like water: ice, water, steam (I got called a heretic once for that argument, but that's probably a story for another time). Each has three distinct aspects, but is one entity.

And each example, ultimately, will be unsatisfying. Because each example, ultimately, will break down. Bishop Lee likes to say that if you can understand it, it's not God.

Still, we seek understanding. We're designed to grasp after something we can never fully catch hold of. We know we can't catch God. And we keep grasping.

In the movie *Contact*, Jodie Foster plays the role of a scientist who has devoted her whole personal and professional life to connecting with living creatures outside of this world. Extra-terrestrial beings. Aliens. She's smart, and she's driven, and she's entirely rational. And when she does make contact with a life form she can't explain or

understand, outside of time and in a different space, one that can't be recorded or studied or verified, she is completely overcome. What had been her near absence of emotion becomes a flush of tears. Her knowledge turns to wonder at the scope and beauty of what she cannot know. "They should have sent a poet," she says. They should have sent a poet.

Maybe poetry is the best language we have for the three-in-one, one-in-three understanding we have of God. Maybe that language itself is poetry. Marianne Micks, an Episcopal theologian and writer, thinks so. And I want to be clear in this - calling that language poetry doesn't make it less real, but instead perhaps *more true*. How else do we enter into the intentional disorientation of "unity in diversity"; "begotten, not made"; "glory of the eternal trinity"?

Today's gospel underscores that poetic, mysterious quality, leaving the disciples (past and present) with perhaps more questions about God than answers. Of the four gospels in the New Testament, John's is the most otherworldly. While he describes things that actually happen, he "goes beyond these events" (*Oxford Annotated Bible*, 1286), in order to create and develop meaning. He uses imagery, like a good poet, to contrast God with the world people know - so in this gospel we see Jesus juxtaposed with bread, light, shepherd, water, a door (*Oxford*, 1286).

In the passage we read today, Jesus is preparing the disciples for his departure. "I have much more to tell you," he says, "but it's more than you can bear right now." (This is entirely an aside, but does anyone *else* hear Jack Nicholson in *A Few Good Men* telling Tom Cruise that he can't handle the truth? And did anybody here ever anticipate Jesus being

compared with Jack Nicholson from this pulpit?) What is it that Jesus has to say that the disciples – then or now – can’t handle? What does that mean?

Jesus continues by saying that the Spirit of truth will come and lead Jesus’ followers into all truth. So what does the Spirit of truth look like, and how are we to know when he or she has arrived? And what is “all truth”? Is that what the disciples experienced at Pentecost, with the mighty wind and the flames? Was that “all truth”, or just its beginning? And how are we supposed to understand all of that?

Finally, Jesus says that the Spirit will take what belongs to Jesus, which has been given to Jesus by the Father, and declare it to the people. Does the Spirit have any autonomy? When will this declaration come? Has it already happened? Is it happening right now?

Three in one.

One in three.

Root. Branches. Trunk.

Flame. Wick. Candle.

Past. Present. Future.

Water. Ice. Steam.

In the end, what we have are our questions. And that’s no empty thing. Questions draw us into what Marriane Micks calls “an emergence of wonder” (4). We don’t question

things that don't matter to us...instead, the opposite is true. Our questions draw us closer. Faith seeks understanding - and while we hope for moments of revelation on this side of the veil, we hope for moments when "God grasps us" (Wondra) - in this life we see through a glass darkly. Still...we try to see.

What draws us closer to God is not The Answer (with a capital A). Because in the end, God will not be reduced to a simple equation or a worldly metaphor...although I believe that God is *in* both the equation and the metaphor. What draws us closer to God is the *fact* that we seek God. When we love the poetry we use to **try** to approach the Trinity, we seek God. When we love the questions that we have about the Father, we seek God. When we love the people whose faces reflect the face of Jesus to us, we seek God. When we love the mystery of Spirit and truth, we seek God.

Three in one.

One in three.

It's a mystery.