

May 30, 2021
Trinity Sunday, Year B
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Isaiah 6:1-8
Psalm 29
Romans 8:12-17
John 3:1-17

The New Testament is not very long. In this Bible, it's 284 pages. The gospels are only 121 pages. But about these relatively few pages, truckloads of pages have been written. With nearly 400 sermons under my belt, I've tossed in a boxful myself.

When it comes to the Bible, the bloating from source to derivation is mega-exponential. No matter how narrow or arcane the topic, it has been expounded upon—and argued about—for generations. It's only a slight exaggeration to say that the entire Protestant reformation was sparked by a verse or two. Maybe that bloating is why the reading load for seminary classes is noted for being dreadfully heavy, though very little of that reading is actually from the Bible.

During my seminary time, I signed up to audit a theology class with one subject, a subject dear to me: the Trinity. My schedule was already full with required courses, but I thought I could manage an audit. I was wrong. The reading load was so excessively heavy that by week two I was irretrievably behind, and so I dropped the class. But before dropping it, I did learn at least one thing: the doctrine of the Trinity is built upon a very few Bible passages. As I remember it, the professor's discussion of those passages took about fifteen minutes of the first day of class. I should add that those passages aren't actually terribly convincing.

Today is Trinity Sunday. Trinity Sunday is observed the Sunday after Pentecost. It's not quite clear why the church has a Trinity Sunday, but it's been around since the 14th century and may have something to do with Christian martyr Thomas Becket.¹ Maybe there's a Trinity Sunday because the Trinity was a point of important theological debate in the early church. Those early Christians had to figure out how Jesus could be divine and still preserve monotheism. The Nicene Creed unified Christians by formulating some of the agreements eventually reached. While there are additional particulars, the core doctrine of the Trinity can be summarized in three points:

- God is three persons.
- Each person is fully God.
- There is one God.

This is hard to wrap logic around. For example: When Jesus the Son is praying to God the Father, then God is praying to Godself? Does that make sense? If we're looking for sense, today's readings don't help. Most importantly, we should be very careful with today's lovely passage from Isaiah, which is always first a Jewish scripture.

You'll sometimes hear preachers or teachers using metaphors to try to explain the Trinity. All the ones I know are nonsensical and/or heretical. Last week it occurred to me to wonder whether some smart person has come up with something new. So I went online and Googled "metaphors for the Trinity." I found nothing new. Well, I did find one article with metaphors pulled from physics and mathematics, but I didn't really understand them and eventually the author admitted that they don't really work.² On the other hand, I found a fun video about the usual metaphors that don't work. It's one of a series of cartoons featuring a couple of fifth-century Irish monks who talk theology with St. Patrick. Here we go.³ [PLAY VIDEO]

That video is good for a laugh, but it doesn't explain the Trinity. Volumes have been written about the Trinity, but they don't *really* explain it either. We always end up back where we started. Maybe that's why the word *mystery* seems to pop up whenever the word *Trinity* is mentioned. In the end, we have to be okay with the mystery. In the end, the Trinity requires a leap of faith.

Maybe you've heard the term "faith seeking understanding." It comes from St. Anselm, an 11-century theologian and philosopher. One resource explains that "'faith seeking understanding' means something like 'an active love of God seeking a deeper knowledge of God.'"⁴

I suppose that "faith seeking understanding" appeals to me because of the way I make decisions, which is by checking in with my stomach. Faced with a choice, as decision time nears, my stomach will either feel fine, or it will feel like it has been invaded by a family of mice. Once my stomach asserts its opinion, I begin to build a structure of reason around that choice. All this is simply to say that while the intellect is the path to understanding, it is not so much the path to faith. The path to faith is more about making friends with mystery.

When I returned to organized religion after a couple of decades away, it was through Unitarian Universalism. There was a lot I appreciated about Unitarian Universalism, but I always felt like something was missing. The gap was a little liturgical and a lot theological. It was also, and I probably shouldn't admit this, less about Jesus and more about the Trinity. This would-be *Unitarian* turned out to be tenaciously *Trinitarian*. This was not because of any doctrine or creed or threat of heresy or damnation. Instead, it was because of what I somehow knew to be true. Seminary gave me the tools to build an intellectual framework around that truth, but that's still just intellectual framework. What's really important exists someplace much deeper.

Maybe, in the still of the evening, the Holy Spirit blew Nicodemus toward Jesus. And that lovely passage from Isaiah? I wouldn't say it's about the Trinity, but I might say it's about how God whispers to each of us—even if, for some of us, it's less like a whisper and more like the presence or absence of metaphorical mice in the belly.

Seminary gave this Trinitarian some fancy words for what God had already taught me about the Trinity. I'll skip the fancy words and try to describe it simply and succinctly. First, God loves us in the ways that we need God to love us. Second, God loves within Godself in ways that help us to love. I could go on, but I think you have to take it from here. Yes, in the end, it's still a mystery, as the mystery itself lures us into the love of the Trinity.

Notes

¹ “Trinity Sunday,” *An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church: A User-Friendly Reference for Episcopalians*, edited by Don S. Armentrout and Robert Boak Slocum, available online at <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/glossary/trinity-sunday/> (accessed May 30, 2021).

² Mats Winther, “Modern metaphors for the Trinity,” 2019, available online at <http://mlwi.magix.net/trinitymetaphor.htm> (accessed May 30, 2021).

³ “St. Patrick’s Bad Analogies,” a video by LutheranSatire, available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=KQLfgaUoQCw> (accessed May 30, 2021).

⁴ Thomas Williams, “Saint Anselm,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, December 8, 2020, available online at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/anselm/#FaiSeeUndChaPurAnsThePro> (accessed May 30, 2021).