

Tri-Unity? Further Thoughts on the PC(USA) Trinity Paper
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
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Text: Matthew 28:16-20

On my summer reading list is a new biography of Albert Einstein, brilliant developer of quantum physics, who more than anyone, ushered in the nuclear era, recalibrating our understanding of the universe on both its macro and micro levels. You might think he is a strange choice to open a sermon on something as theological as the Trinity, but consider how he said that the mystery of the universe is not its incomprehensibility, but its comprehensibility. To Einstein, the more we learn, the more awe-struck we become; the greater our powers of knowledge, the more humble our stance. In a similar way, I believe the mystery of God is not so much that God is incomprehensible as that God has chosen to reveal to us mortals something of the immortal, Divine life – to give us perspectives from which to comprehend – at least in part – the incomprehensible.

Those perspectives are named in our morning text as Jesus addresses his disciples for the last time. He commissions them to go into the whole world and make other disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Three perspectives on God; three ways to comprehend the incomprehensible. But it seems to add up to one impossible math problem. One plus One plus One equals.....One. How can this be? Listen for God's Word to the church in the reading from the gospel according to Matthew, in the 28th chapter, at the sixteenth verse. [MATTHEW 28:16-20]

A seminary preaching professor I admired said often that every sentence of a sermon should be subjected to the "so what?" test (think how much shorter many sermons would be if the preacher, including this one, practiced that!). But we have to wonder: Why spend even one moment of worship on a gorgeous summer Sunday wrestling with a doctrinal issue that seems more the purview of

theologians locked away in ivory steeples--far removed from the down-to-earth complexities of our daily lives? Why?--on a Sunday when our graduating high school seniors are, shall we say, a captive audience, and it may be one of our last chances to give them an anchor that will help them navigate the restless seas of college and young adulthood – do we spend it on this strange concept? The Trinity: so what????!

Well, I'm not so sure it is all that far removed. I saw an ad recently for a local church's contemporary worship service that described it as "meaningful, comfortable, [and] all about you." The church that wrote that ad may desire to meet people where they are, but worship that is all about us is not worship. Spending some time thinking about the Trinity shifts the spotlight away from ourselves. It's not about human nature, but the nature of God. Not about how we're supposed to be, but how God is; not about what we ought to do but about what God has already done. It's not about you – or me! The focus of worship is the Source of Life and Author of Love: the Holy God, whom alone we are to worship and serve. I actually can't think of anything more important to leave our departing young people than a perspective on God as One who knows all about us and still wants to communicate and share life and love with us.

But how do we say that? The Church in every age has tried to make that clear through the concept of the Trinity. It hasn't been a pretty picture. Instead, church debate has been heated and divisive ever since...oh, about 325 AD, the period just after Christianity gained some official standing as the religion of the empire. Turn to page 15 in your hymnbook. Here the language is that Jesus, the only begotten son of God was of one substance with the Father and that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. But notice the Ecumenical Version just below it has a parenthesis which speaks volumes. Turns out that the Eastern Church didn't believe the Spirit proceeded from both the Father and Son but only from the Father. In the original document they signed, they claimed that particular clause was not there, and that it was inserted without their approval after the document had already been signed. It was largely this

difference that led to the split that created the Roman Catholic Church in the west and the Eastern Orthodox church.

Unfortunately, this was not the only time the doctrine of the Trinity would prove controversial. The second Helvetic Confession, written in 1566 (and one of the faith statements in our Book of Confessions), specifically condemns “Jews and Mohammedans, and all those who blaspheme that sacred and adorable Trinity.” It turns out that the condemnation was quite literal. Michael Servetus sent John Calvin—our sixteenth century theological forerunner—a series of letters outlining an idea he’d been working on that suggested that Jesus, being truly human, was not of exactly the same substance as God. When he came to Geneva, he was arrested, and John Calvin himself participated in the heresy trial which eventually condemned Servetus to death.

Only one shameful example in a long line of stories that could be told of the church’s deadly defense of the one true faith. A line that continues even to this day, as many parts of the church have dusted off the old heresy charge and been flinging it at people. The Presbyterian Church is not immune to this, as reflected in our decades-old debates about ordination of gays and lesbians. Under that particular issue is a larger one that insists the Church have complete theological uniformity on every doctrine of the faith...or else. Or else: denial of ordination, firings, economic threats, public maligning, departure from the denomination. In such a climate, a committee of Presbyterian clergy and lay leaders, academics and pastors and elders, were commissioned to write a study paper on the doctrine of the trinity, which was adopted by the General Assembly last summer.

The paper is entitled “God’s Love Overflowing” –and is an attempt to express the abundance of riches that flow without limit from the God who seeks and saves us, reconciles and renews us, and draws us into loving relationships with God and with one another. It is heavily rooted in Scripture, identifying the three perspectives we find

there: Father, Son, Holy Spirit, the self-revelation of the One God who is creator, redeemer, and friend.

So we come to know God the creator – in the vastness of a universe billions of years old with its quarks and quirks and cosmic wonders, to the mind-blowing intricacies of cell division and sub-atomic particles. We hike Grand Canyon....we take an astronomy course...we hold a newborn baby, and we begin to comprehend God. Wisdom, power, artistry, playfulness, grandeur. Holy, holy, holy.

But there is more. We come to know God in the person of a Jewish man in Israel two thousand years ago in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. In Jesus we see the Divine love embodied: in a passion for justice, an affection for sinners, a particular compassion for the poor. In Jesus, we glimpse a God who laughs and weeps, who forgives and heals, who feeds the hungry and challenges the systems that make them hungry. In Jesus we see a God who stops at nothing – not even death – to show us that God is for us. Holy, holy, holy.

One more perspective from which we can know the Divine. God is with us. As close as our intaken breath or beating heart. Holy Spirit. The Comforter, who like a finely- knitted prayer shawl, covers and protects us. The Advocate, who prays for us when our words fail. The Friend who gives rest to the weary, courage when we're afraid, and the peace that passes our human understanding. Holy, holy, holy.

The limits of language trip us up, even here, if we try to assign tasks to each of the three persons exclusively – as if only God the Father created; as if only God the Son saved; as if only God the Holy Spirit animated our lives. Instead, we are presented with the tri-unity of God; three perspectives but all essential aspects of God's very being. John of Damascus – an 18th century theologian used a beautiful Greek word to describe this mystery. The word is *perichoresis*; "peri" meaning "around," and "choresis" -like choreography – meaning "dance." The nature of God's being is a circle dance, a community

with no hierarchy, no beginning, no end – just one eternal, joyous dance of love, with each partner contributing equally to the overflowing grace of the outwardly spiraling pattern, that pulls us in and invites us to dance as well. “God’s Love Overflowing” reminds us that ALL our language about God is limited; we cannot define God or confine God to even the sum of our imagination. So we employ metaphor, a range of biblical images, and our personal experience to express praise to the One who is Light, Living Water, Rock, Cornerstone, Fire, Mother, and

...the incomprehensible becomes known as a loving Parent, a friend who sacrifices even life on our behalf, a spiritual presence, consoling, guiding, and prodding us. Think again of the Matthew text we read. Here Jesus is essentially leaving the disciples in charge of the ministry he had initiated. He sends them into the world and then gives them a promise: remember. Remember, I am with you always. I am. Those words. That name. We’ve heard it before. The name given to Moses from a burning bush by a Power who had responded in compassion to the cries of enslaved people and who had sent Moses to liberate them. “Who shall I say sent me?” Moses demanded. “What is your name?” My name is “I AM.” “I AM” sent you.

. . . And is still sending men and women into the world to proclaim good news of freedom and to baptize every person into a family of God that excludes no one. And remember, “I AM” is with you, forever, come what may. One God in three persons, blessed Trinity.

Maybe that’s why I want to end this sermon with a math problem. A goat herder had three sons. He determined that when he died, he would leave a portion of his herd to each of them: half to the eldest, one-third to the middle son, and one-ninth to the youngest. When he died, his herd had 17 goats in it. Now this presented a problem for his sons because they couldn’t figure out how to divide their inheritance: 17 could not be divided by 2, nor by 3, nor by 9. And half a goat is not very useful. After a while, they fell to arguing about the division and finally when it looked like the argument might end

in bloodshed, they all agreed to go to the rabbi and ask him to settle the dispute. So they went to the rabbi and after listening to their dilemma, the rabbi said. "This is how I will settle the dispute. I will give you my goat so you will have 18. The sons were delighted. They took the goat home and started dividing the herd. Half of 18 was nine. The eldest son received his nine goats. One third of 18 was six, so the middle son received his six goats. One ninth of 18 was 2, so the youngest son received his 2 goats. Everyone was happy – one with 9, one with 6 and one with 2. Seventeen in all. And with gratitude, they took the leftover goat back to the rabbi! It doesn't make sense. You can't figure it out. It doesn't fit. But it works! *[I am grateful to my sister, the Rev. Dr. Sue Ellen Westfall, for reminding me of this delightful and instructive tale from the Hassidim, and for other elements of this sermon]*

The Trinity. It doesn't make sense. You can't figure it out. It doesn't fit. But it works! Let us receive our theological inheritance with gratitude and joy, without coming to blows over it with anyone. There will always be enough and more. God's love overflowing; a truth we can delight in, and a mystery we can offer back to its Divine Source. Holy, holy, holy God. God above us. God for us. God with us. Remember! ---even to the end of the age.

MAY THE GOD OF ALL GRACE

CHARGE AND BLESSING: Go into the world in peace; ready to love; eager to serve. The grace of Christ attend you, the love of God surround you, the Holy Spirit keep you, that you may live in faith, abound in hope and grow in love, both now and forevermore. Alleluia! Amen.

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