

Homily – Trinity Sunday

Julie Shires

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About 30 years ago, Paul and I moved to Indonesia to work with a relief and development group called Mennonite Central Committee. We went with our 18 month old son William. our son Adam was born 5 months later. We lived there for 4 years.

Indonesia has the distinction of being the largest Muslim country in the world by population. Because of foreign influences, Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism are all recognized religions.

Twelve years ago we returned to Indonesia to visit friends and to show our sons where they spent the first few years of their lives.

We started our visit on the island of Bali. We hailed a taxi to take us to some Hindu temples. Hinduism is the most common religion on the island. Our driver who no doubt drove hundreds of tourists told us that Hinduism, like Christianity has one God. Hinduism has dozens of deities that embody forces of nature, moral values, special knowledge, energy or powers. He went on to say, Christianity has only 3; The Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

His statement gives me pause. From time to time I revisit the thought that there are many representations of God in the Bible. First, there are manifestations. A manifestation is defined by a personal encounter with a deity that is temporary but tangible to the observer. Beginning with our OT reading of Genesis, God is revealed as creator and manifest by voice. God spoke and it was so. God is revealed as voice. God is manifest to Moses in the burning bush. God appears as manifest through angels. God led Israelites out of Egypt as a cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night.

OT writers often speak metaphorically, searching for language to describe the nature of God.

The Lord is my shepherd
God is a potter, we are the clay
God is my rock, my fortress, my deliverer

There is a devotional called 100 Names for God. Here are a few names you might have heard before.

Elohim-mighty creator
Jehovah Jireh-God my Provider
El Shadai-God Almighty
Yahweh-I am
Adonai-Lord
Immanuel-God with Us

And today we observe Trinity Sunday. Father Son and Holy Spirit, as read to us in our Gospel lesson. In the wealth of knowledge and revelation, biblical study and research, does it really come down to Father Son and Holy Spirit?

The Bible recognizes numbers as having meaning.

The number 40, for instance, represents a long time, usually a time marked by trial and testing that ultimately lead to transformation. We read that Noah and his family were in the Ark and it rained 40 days and 40 nights. Moses led his people out of slavery, but then wandered in the desert for 40 years.

The number 7 is clearly symbolic and likely the most sacred as it is mentioned more than 600 times in the Bible. Like we read today, God rested from creation on the 7th day.

The number 3 holds great significance in the Bible. Apart from the Father Son and Holy Spirit, the benediction in 2 Corinthians contains the words grace, love, and communion. At the end of I Corinthians 13 we read: Faith Hope and Love remain, but the greatest of these is love. In Jewish culture, three days past the time of death indicated they were truly dead. Jesus conquered death by not rising until the third day.

Sometimes a word or phrase is repeated to indicate intensity, or to reveal an epiphany, to come full circle, or to drive a point home. Jesus was tempted by Satan in the desert 3 times. Peter was told he would deny Jesus three times. The disciple John was asked by Jesus three times, do you love me?

Have you ever heard of the rule of 3? They say that anything you want people to remember, present it in a sequence of three. Do you ever try to memorize a shopping list and can only bring to mind three items? Research shows that we can recall just three to four items from our short-term memory.

And if you think this just a communication tool, nature and science illustrate hundreds of phenomena in groups of 3. Three is the perfect number. Three is the smallest number of elements required to create a pattern.

The triangle is considered to be the strongest shape and frequently use in building structures, such as bridges with trusses. Slice a humble cucumber or watermelon, and you see the shape of a triangle.

Anything present in groups of three is more effective and memorable. Interior designers will tell you to decorate effectively, group items sets of 3 —3 vases, three pillows, three photographs, a seating arrangement of three. Three represents completeness, perfection, balance. It is a number that embodies harmony, wisdom, understanding, peace.

Is Matthew 28:19 is just construct of the number 3? Like the rule of 3, a communication device to help us remember? After all, there is very little consensus on what the Trinity is. Pastors I'm told, dread Trinity for the difficulty in explaining what some theologians has declared as unexplainable. A pessimistic writer said that if you deny the Trinity you lose your soul. If you try to explain the Trinity, you lose your mind.

Trinity represents a holy mystery. As a doctrine, the Trinity is reinforced by a collection of passages and texts that support God as Three persons in One.

Some Christians say that God is like water, the chemical H₂O, where water exists as a vapor, liquid and solid while retaining its chemical identity.

Others try to apply mathematics to the Trinity: $1 + 1 + 1 = 3$ and not 1, Others point out that $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$.

The doctrine of the Trinity more than juggling numbers, for God cannot be the result either of addition or multiplication.

And since I have made that point that anything presented in groups of three is to be remembered, a good sermon will have 3 points. I want to linger on the perfect number 3 to illustrate 3 characteristics of the Trinity rather than the 3 persons of the Trinity.

Trinity as Safety

I like the image of a triangle, a symbol of strength. Picture yourself sitting inside the boundaries of a triangle. On all three sides you are equally protected. It is a place where we feel safe, where we find our center, the core of who we are. In time we gain our strength and our confidence to be who are an the triangle expands. We may venture outside the triangle, but we are always welcome back to the core, to realign ourselves to our center. Trinity as safety.

Trinity is Grace

I encourage all of us to read our St. Barnabas website. There are several statements of our values and intent as a church community. It says, "we form a diverse community of people of all ages, ethnicities, sexual orientations, gender identities, life experiences, and political perspectives. We are a place of faith, refuge, and welcome for people and families who may have experienced alienation elsewhere." How are we doing at St. Barnabas in extending grace to other people?

The passage in Matthew is the only place in the Bible that we see the words Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It says that the disciples went to the mountain as directed and when they saw Jesus they worshiped him, even though some of them doubted. Jesus didn't say, get your theology in order, make it correct. No, is what was probably

Jesus' last act of grace, he laid out the great commission in very broad strokes and said in "go, remember I am with you always" Trinity as grace.

Trinity is Communion

If there is one thing bible scholars and teachers can agree on, it is that the Trinity is relational.

In the beautiful passage of Genesis, is thought to be written by Moses during the time of exile. The creation story reads like poetry, almost like hymn, with each verse representing an arc of creation. There is the night and the day, and after each day of work God declares it very good. The creation story is rich with detail of our beautiful world, full of diversity and imagination. Life in exile was far from ideal, chaotic, and uncertain. The passage reminds us that God is in our midst and what is being created in our lives is very good. Psalm 8:4 When I consider your heavens the work your fingers, the moon and the stars you set in their courses, what is man that you should be mindful of him? Trinity is Communion.

John of Kronstadt, a 19th Russian priest said,

As the Holy Trinity, our God is One Being, although Three Persons, so, likewise, we ourselves must be one. As our God is indivisible, we also must not be divided, as though we were one person, one mind, one will, one heart, one goodness – in a word, one pure love, as God is Love.

We have imagined the Trinity, as a triangle, a place of safety, we enter that space to receive grace and communion, we gather our strength and confidence in the presence of a loving God because we long to be made whole. May we find solace in the Trinity, and a place where our bodies and souls become one.