

There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”

“Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

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Welcome to Trinity Sunday. We are likely to encounter some turbulence on this flight, so please make sure your seatbelt is fastened, even if the sign is off. In the event of a water landing, please refer to the renewal of baptismal vows in the Book of Common Prayer located in the seat pocket in front of you.

OK. Now. There are those who find the Trinity too obscure to be useful and others who consider the Trinity to be irrelevant because they can’t relate it to their everyday personal experience. Even so, there are whole communities of church-goers who focus almost entirely on the Holy Spirit and others who concentrate on the Jesus that they find in scripture, while still others see God as utterly “other” and beyond human encounter.

It’s safe to say that all of our descriptions and even our most compelling images and symbols fall short of the immensely rich

diversity-in-unity of God. And yet, trying to understand the Trinity still makes a difference.

The traditional definition, “three persons in one substance,” while theologically appropriate, can evoke unfortunate images of three people sitting in a bowl of soup. Icons or paintings of two dudes and a bird aren’t much better.

Consequently, we refer to the Trinity as a “*mysterium absolutum*.” (Trot that out at a dinner party and see how many new friends you make.) What that phrase means is that the Trinity cannot be known without revelation and yet, even after that revelation, cannot become completely understandable.

Imagine the Trinity as a map of the multi-dimensional human experience of God. That allows us to say – cautiously – that most Christians notice three different aspects of the One Divine. None of these three aspects can be collapsed into the others and all three are necessary to adequately present at least the Christian idea and experience of God.

God, the First Person of the Trinity, the Birther. We experience this aspect of God when we become aware that we, ourselves, exist; that we have being. God, however, is not one being among other beings. God is Being-Itself – or what Fr. Keith Ward, professor of Divinity at Oxford University, describes as “the utterly transcendent creative ground of all being, beyond human comprehension, the unlimited ocean of infinity, the abyss beyond all duality from which all things issue, the ultimate cause of all.”

(Ready?) God, the Second Person of the Trinity, the Logos. Our *awareness* that we have being means that awareness is another aspect of existence. (I did warn you there would be a little turbulence.) God is not just some intelligence outside of reality. God is Awareness-Itself, the consciousness in which all possibilities exist. The absolute awareness of absolute being is the Word.

This self-illuminating awareness exists, as Ward says, “as the uncreated light of wisdom [that] gives form and intelligibility to all things.” Christians see Jesus of Nazareth as a perfect human embodiment of that Divine Awareness.

God, the Third Person, the purposeful life energy of creation. Our natural curiosity about creation draws our attention. And by reaching

our attention out purposefully – with intention – we can sort data out of noise. We draw information out of raw data, we compose knowledge out of information and we gather understanding from streams of knowledge.

The impulse to expand our awareness along this progression toward understanding reflects and reveals God’s energy, God’s purpose in us. God is not some detached, disinterested observer of the world.

God is Spirit-Itself, the Third Person, the dynamic energy of God’s love that gives actuality to the forms conceived by the Divine Wisdom; the God-Within who delights in the particularity of all things and who, as Ward says, “works inwardly to shape all things toward their own unique fulfillment as manifold images and vehicles of the divine.”

The *Unity* of God, the One, is not “one” in a numerical sense, but in the sense that there is no “other,” no opposite. We can’t say that God, the ultimate reality, is Being rather than not-Being; Consciousness over and against not-Consciousness; Spirit instead of not-Spirit.

Nothing absolute can be said about God as Trinity. Including what I just said.

And so, we say *something*, even knowing it to be incomplete.

In talking with his friend and teacher, Jesus, Nicodemus refers to all three persons of the Trinity, without ever exhausting the mystery. “We know,” Nicodemus says, “that *you* [Jesus, a perfect manifestation of the Word] are a teacher who has come from God [the Birther of all creation] for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God [the loving life-energy of God.]”

There is a gentleness and a joy in the relationship of these two friends. And their example may be more fruitful than any description of the Trinity. We discover who God *is* by practicing the kind of open, loving commitment that these two share. That’s the kind of relationship that reveals God’s presence in the world and God’s yearning for what the church can embody.

The mystery of the Trinity provides experiences that are not easily contained; experiences that challenge human assumptions, such as the enduring truth that the church is more than her institutions. The life-energy of the church is in and among people living out a way of being in

the world. Living and acting in right relationship to promote God's peace, justice and mercy for all God's creation.

Just this last Thursday, Archbishop Michael Curry led a sizeable crowd in a procession to the White House where they made a public declaration that 23 Christian leaders from multiple denominations created to, in their words, "reclaim Jesus" from people they believe are using Christian theology for political gain.

"We are not a partisan group," Curry said, "we are not a left-wing group, we are not a right-wing group. And we came together, Protestant, Catholic, evangelical; we came together, Republicans, Independents and Democrats; we came together, liberal and conservative, and whatever is in the middle; we came together because what binds us together is Jesus of Nazareth and his way."

The declaration calls for people of faith to go "deeper into our relationship to God; deeper into our relationships with each other, especially across racial, ethnic, and national lines; deeper into our relationships with the most vulnerable, who are at greatest risk."

So, yes, trying to understand the relational context of the Trinity makes a difference – it will *remain* a mystery, but *never* irrelevant.

The impulse toward seeking to understand the Trinity – the *impulse itself* – is God's invitation into the relationship at the heart of who and what the church strives to be. "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" and "all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God."

In practice, that means that any statement or act that condemns or demonizes other ways of responding to God is anti-Trinitarian. Saying that Christianity is the only way to be in right relationship with God is anti-Trinitarian. Any use of scripture to support anti-Semitism, white supremacy, misogyny, homophobia or racism is anti-Trinitarian. Any theology that promotes a future rapture event where Terminator Jesus will take all the "right kind of people" to heaven and fry the rest of us sinners is anti-Trinitarian.

The beautiful truth that shines from the mystery of the Trinity is that God's love is so immense, so inclusive, that it looks a great deal like love shared in and among a community. And if we will share it in

that spirit, if we share it *fully*, God's love will spill joyfully over the top of any institutional container into human lives and into the whole world.

And with that, brothers and sisters, the captain has turned off the "fasten seat belt" sign, and you are free once again to move around creation.

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