

“PEOPLE TALKING ABOUT GOD”

Romans 5:1-5; Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

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Garrett Johnson reported that a professor of Theology once asked his students: “If I were to tell you today that we have discovered new texts of the bible... that reveal that our One God is, in reality, two people and not three, how would you react? What would change in your life?” It’s an interesting question for a room full of theology students, but I think we know the answer for a typical congregation on a Sunday morning.

Now we are a curious bunch here at Westminster, so I would expect some of you would want to know... from me... what sort of difference that should make for us. But most of us will jump straight to the honest answer: “Not much.” We just don’t think about structuring our lives around a “doctrine,” let alone one so full of mystery as the Trinity. The classic statement about the Trinity does not come with a clear application: God is revealed in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each is fully God while being distinct from one another, and yet God is One.

Historically, this way of putting it has not produced a lot of harmony in the faith community. To begin with, you will not find the classical formula clearly stated anywhere in the Bible. The trouble started shortly after the church began to establish the canon of writings that would become the New Testament. From those writings, the church, during the second century, began to vigorously defend the affirmation that Jesus was fully human and fully divine. Over the next two centuries, church authorities developed and then defended the proper understanding of the Trinity. In its interest in purity of doctrine, the church has caused a great deal of harm, including putting to death those whom it found to be heretics.

This may be why many preachers limit themselves to using the Trinity to affirm the mystery of God, that God is beyond our understanding. In my mind, this only contributes to the widely held belief in the irrelevance of doctrine for Christian praxis. But here’s the thing, even though doctrine presents itself as established truth, it’s actually the result of a long and extensive conversation that is continuing into the present and future.

So much has been said about the Trinity in the last fifty years that has changed the way we think about God. Whereas theologians acknowledge that there is much about God that remains a mystery, there are things that we can and should understand. Doctrines are not immutable truths, but part of a conversation that can bring insight into how we should live. Doctrines reflect a history of people talking about God. They are attempts to understand God.

So this morning we are going to look at scripture and art that are part of the conversation about the Trinity. We’re going to set aside the classical formula which has become little more than a conversation stopper, and hopefully see why the church has invested so much energy into this doctrine over its history.



Let's start with the prehistory, the personification of God as Wisdom in Proverbs 8. "To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all who live," (verse 4) writes the teacher. Far from wanting to be a mystery, God wants to connect to the world. God wants to be in relationship with people. The sages of Judaism believe that we can understand something about God through wisdom. They go on to tell us that wisdom was the first of God's creation forming the foundation for the earth and all that it contains. Far from being unknowable, God is revealed in the things we can see. According to Genesis 1, God speaks and things come into being. We read in Romans that "ever since the creation of the world God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been seen and understood through the things God has made" (1:20).

The Bible doesn't ask us to suspend our understanding of the world in order to believe God. Faith and science work together, evolution and creation are not contradictions, the truths we learn about the world are insights into God. The wonders of nature are testimony to God's goodness. Our failure to respect the earth is painful to God.

In fact, people in the Bible tell stories about the times when people displeased God. The Bible is not ignorant of evil in the world. This very old image of the Trinity is taken from the story in Genesis of Abraham showing hospitality to the three strangers who represent "the Lord." They are on their way to Sodom to investigate the wickedness taking place there. Abraham knows about Sodom. His nephew Lot happens to live there. He has a vested interest in saving the city and so he gets God to agree that if five righteous people can be found, the city would be spared. The story tells us several things that people were saying about God at the time: that God is not unaware of harms being done and will not allow wickedness to go unchecked; that God is merciful and responds to those who would seek mercy; that God can be recognized, and that it is incumbent upon people to extend hospitality to others as though extending it to God. In the end, Sodom is destroyed as much for its failure to extend hospitality (they, in fact, attempt to abuse the visitors) as for the Lord's failure to find even five righteous persons.

None of this story is actually in the image itself, but it's a helpful reminder that like the storyteller, the artist is offering a perspective on God, using a picture to talk about God. This is an icon painted by a Russian artist named Andrei Rublev. Icons are a special kind of art that break the rules of traditional art. You may notice that the figures look a bit odd, a bit distorted and flat. The technique is called Reverse Perspective where objects in the distance are brought forward into the viewing plane. Instead of a painting where the perspective lines converge behind the service creating a vanishing point, the lines actually diverge creating the impression of the painting opening into a much larger space.

Icons are often understood as windows on the divine because as the background image comes forward, it shrinks the size of the viewer. You literally feel smaller when looking at an icon than if you were looking at a Monet Water Lily. No matter how large the pond, the observer is bigger. No matter how small the icon, the observer feels smaller. The emphasis is on the image, a window

on God... and yet it ironically feels like you're looking into your own soul. Is it a mirror or is it a window or is it by some mysterious logic, both.

Let's look a little closer. This is a fairly traditional interpretation of the Trinity. There are three figures appearing from left to right: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The dominant figure is the Father, the only one sitting up straight. The other two are nodding toward the Father underscoring what one of the creeds says about the two "proceeding" from the Father. Each holds a shepherd's rod expressing the truth that each of them has a relationship of leadership and compassion for the human flock. They are gathered around a table with a cup on it. One imagines it as a communion table. There is room and one feels an invitation from the figures for others to join them at the table. If you use your imagination a little you can see that the three figures form a cup in which Jesus is sitting. The brown and the blue of his robe represent his ties to heaven and earth. You can see his gesture of blessing, while the spirit's hands are pointing down indicating descent into our world.

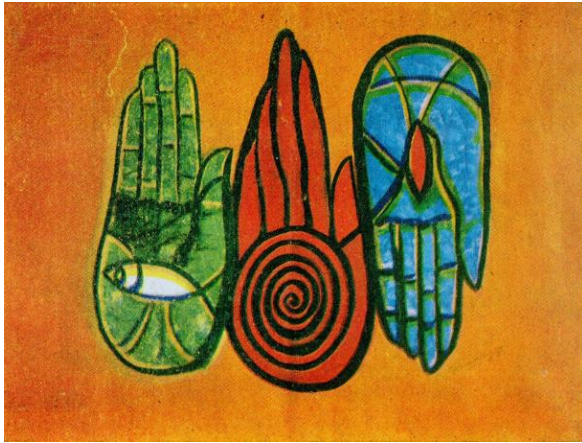
Rublev's Trinity depicts God both as a community and as a unity. There is welcome and hospital. There is love in the sacrifice represented by the cup. There is mystery, but also understanding about God, an artist's picture talking about God, a window on the divine... and yet also a mirror: the elements of communion extending an invitation to the viewer to be the body of Christ, an open door in the background and room around the table, extending hospitality to us, shining a mirror on our community, on our faith. Are we not, like these three, made for one another? Are we not a circle defined by love? Does the God we understand from this icon not call us to a similar posture of living?

Carrie Purcell Kahler wrote this poem after viewing the icon:

After Rublev's Trinity

Each face turned toward
a face at table leaving
always a space for
one more. An open
door to run through when someone
can't quite make it home
on their own. Though the
wings work, humans haven't got
them, and it's hard to
converse from heights so,
in one hand a staff to lean
on. The other hand
ever reaches down."

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This more contemporary image comes from Indian artist Father A.J. Thamburaj, a Jesuit priest. It's also very much like an icon. Are we looking through a window or into a mirror. It's certainly about God, about the Trinity; but it also calls us to something. More symbolic, but no less concrete. The green represents creativity and fertility; the red, activity; the blue, sea and sky (symbols of eternity and mystery). The Father's upraised hand on the left is a symbol of protection in Indian art and dance. The fish is the ever-watching eye of God which never closes.

The red hand represents the Spirit's purifying fire; the spiral is the wind that ties the Trinity together as one. The downward hand is Christ, a gesture common in Indian sculpture and dance; the red wound speaks of his sacrifice, from which the new life of the faith community arose.

These hands of God speak to me of God's devotion to creation and commitment to the human community. The Trinity is not just a doctrine. Here, Father Thamburaj, interprets it in the language and culture of his country, India. At one point in the church's history, it was just a doctrine by which ecclesiastical authorities judged the orthodoxy of the faithful. Some still do this, but many are using it to talk about God that inspires faith, life, hope and love. Forty-five years ago, I discovered Douglas John Hall who emphasized that the Trinity helps us understand that God and life are all about relationships. More recently, Jurgen Moltmann connected the doctrine to hope for me, and Sallie McFague saw it as a model that describes the way the universe works, as a call to a certain kind of living.

It's not about memorizing a certain formula, nor about preserving God's mystery. As dead doctrine, it does nothing for us, for our world, or for God for that matter. As a platform for talking about God, for trying to understand the God who welcomes us, interacts with us, wants to know us; it does have the potential to change the way we live because as Paul writes in Romans, "God's lover has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit." Good things can happen when people start talking about God. Amen.