

Theology for Thinking People: The Trinity

Acts 1:11

Someone asked me last week if I was religious as a child. I'm not sure I've ever been asked that before. And of course, what does it mean to be 'religious' when you're a child, before anyone has taught you what that means?

But the question called me back to what it felt like to be in church when I was 8 or 9 years old. I grew up in the Armenian Orthodox Church, which is very different from church in our Methodist tradition. The liturgy every Sunday was led by a priest who wore heavy, brocade robes and a hat that looked to me like a crown. A handful of men surrounded him; they chanted with him and sometimes in response to him. Many times during the 2-1/2 hour worship service, one of them would swing a fancy gold cup at the end of a chain, releasing the sweet, smoky smell of incense. When the incense pointed toward us, it signaled that this was the moment to make the sign of the cross on our chests. From time to time a drape would be drawn, hiding everything the priest and deacons were doing from the rest of us. Just a murmur came from behind the curtain. The congregation would kneel—praying, waiting, knowing that something magical, holy, was happening behind the curtain, invisible to the rest of us.

None of that service was spoken or sung in English, so I didn't really understand the words, but I knew them; some of those foreign words I can recite still. We followed along in a book with an English translation, but I still couldn't make sense of many of the words; they were stilted and foreign even in English. I remember squeezing my eyes shut, trying to connect with the immense, awesome God that might be behind all the layers of language and curtain and ritual and drama of that liturgy. Sometimes I felt like I could almost touch something; sometimes I could not.

I imagine the followers of Jesus who watched him disappear into the clouds might have felt like I did in church--confined by their humanness, observers of some mystical happening that was beyond their understanding. There were words that didn't were hard to understand.

That's what it has meant to be human beings in the presence of God for most of human history. Still, in most parts of the world. It is a peculiarly Protestant, Western European, Enlightenment-inspired thing to think that faith depends on each of us making rational sense out of every part of the Judeo-Christian story.

I say that today because we are talking about the Trinity, which is the theological proposition that our one God appears as three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If you can't quite wrap your mind around that idea, you're in good company. The Trinity has been a source of confusion and rough metaphors for thousands of years. Some of those metaphors are helpful; some are not.

- The Trinity is like a man, who can be son and husband and father all at the same time; or a woman—daughter, wife, mother.

- The Trinity is like water, which can be liquid or gas like steam or solid like ice. All still water.
- The Trinity is like a shamrock: three leaves making one thing.
- My personal favorite. The Trinity is like an egg: yolk, white, shell—all necessary parts of that thing that comes out of a chicken.

These explanations are like a pneumonic device—it helps you remember, but it doesn't mean much. They're our attempt to understand something that belongs to a world we only have hints about.

But this idea of the Trinity—God in three persons—is a central piece of Christian theology. Every strand of Christianity—Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, evangelical, progressive, Pentecostal—holds this belief. You won't find the word *Trinity* in the Bible; the term was coined in the third century by a theologian named Tertullian, to collect into one concept the various ways people in the biblical story and in the Church had experienced the Holy. God is an awe-inspiring force, creator of everything, immense, unknowable. God is a person who carried in his human body all the qualities of love: forgiveness, healing, inexhaustible compassion. God is an invisible spirit that breathes life and knowing and sometimes surprising power into ordinary people, and into the connections between them.

Sometimes our stories put these three faces of God in sequence: the Creator God was there from the beginning, present to the most ancient humans. Then a character we can only imagine as God's son—offspring—came for the length of a human life. When he was gone, people felt an invisible presence, startling as fire and elusive as wind. But the biblical story actually suggests something else: that the Spirit of God was hovering even at Creation; that the Christ, God's human expression, was with God even before the world began; that he is alive still, in followers who internalize and replicate his life today. In you and me.

So here's what I want to say to you today, thinking people who are always constructing and re-constructing your theology: It's OK not to completely understand the Trinity, just like you don't have to fully comprehend why our story says Jesus was born from a mother who was a virgin, or that his body disappeared on Easter. Don't even try to corral the idea of God into some rational formula. $1+1+1$ is never going to mathematically equal 1. People a lot smarter and more spiritual than us have struggled with this concept.

In a book called *The Divine Dance*, Richard Rohr wrote this about the Trinity:

*God for us, we call you Father.
 God alongside us, we call you Jesus.
 God within us, we call you Holy Spirit.*

Do you notice the humility in how he speaks? That 'we call you' language acknowledges implicitly that our thoughts, our names, are only approximations. They are never enough to capture the whole of that mysterious thing we are trying to put into words. But neither do they dismiss the mystery because it cannot be explained.

My favorite new thing these days is a little book called *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*. It's a collection of made-up words that gives a name to feelings that we don't have words for in English. Like 'sonder'—that occasional flash of awareness you get that every person, every random passerby, has a life just as vivid and complex as yours, as full of complicated loves and persistent worries and small triumphs as yours is.

Or this one: 'Ozurie' he calls it. The feeling we can imagine Dorothy living with after she goes back to Kansas from the Land of Oz. She wanted so much to go home to her black-and-white life, and she's glad to be there, but she's been changed by having lived, for just a little while, in color. She knows that everything she sees now through that gray filter has another, more brilliant dimension to it; but she's the only one who can see it.

This book reminds me that words are only approximations of what we mean. The author, John Koenig, talks in the book about the word 'O.K.' *Okay*, he says, is the most commonly understood word in the world. It's the closest thing we have to a universal language. Where did those two letters come from? Who put them together? What did they mean originally? No one knows. It doesn't matter. The story of *O.K.* is a parable, he says.

The parable of okay is a reminder to stay humble. To be sure, words are enormously powerful; they give meaning to everything they touch. But a word on its own can't give meaning to itself...In language, as in life, meaning isn't something that's built in. It emerges spontaneously in the interactions between elements, even those that are meaningless on their own—a single word, a single moment, a single life. String a handful of notes into a song, and anyone who hears it can be moved to tears, or break out dancing. But a note by itself means nothing at all.ⁱ

What he says about words might also be said about our names for God. Any one of them—Father, Son, Spirit—is too small to communicate the whole of God. Even our best words might. Not bring us to concreteness or certainty, but they offer us wonder and humility, recognition that we are in the presence of something will never understand fully.

And maybe that is the truest thing we can say about God. God is not something for us to 'figure out.' The fifth century theologian Augustine said, 'If you think you understand God, it is not God.' God is *supposed* to be beyond our understanding. You can never say truthfully about God 'I've got it.' We're *supposed* to feel tongue-tied, even speechless, in the face of ultimate mystery. The best we can do is circle God's meaning, reach toward something that catches on a picture that sharpens for a moment and then fades out again. Mystery isn't something you *can't* understand, Richard Rohr says. It's something you can *endlessly* understand.

It is our human task to keep wondering, reaching, stopping occasionally to kneel and kiss the ground. To bow down before a Great Truth that will always be just beyond our grasp.

ⁱ John Koenig, *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*, p. 255-256.