

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

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Trinitarian Experience

1 Kings 19.11-13; Matthew 28.16-20

Russ Dean, May 18, 2008



In preparing a sermon in defense of a Trinitarian theology, I came across these words from the *Catholic Encyclopedia*:

The Trinity is the term employed to signify the central doctrine of the Christian religion -- the truth that in the unity of the Godhead there are Three Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, these Three Persons being truly distinct one from another. Thus, in the words of the Athanasian Creed: "the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, and yet there are not three Gods but one God." In this Trinity of Persons the Son is begotten of the Father by an eternal generation, and the Holy Spirit proceeds by an eternal procession from the Father and the Son. Yet, notwithstanding this difference as to origin, the Persons are co-eternal and co-equal: all alike are uncreated and omnipotent...

There you go! I almost feel like I can sit down now. That just sums it up so simply, doesn't it!? Using this kind of language for seventeen centuries to defend the Trinity, it's not difficult to understand why this doctrine, though it has remained central to the Church, has also been one of the least understood, and perhaps most neglected by the masses.

Now, to be fair, let us admit that just because we cannot explain or understand something, does not necessarily mean it is unreal or untrue or unimportant. I had an eye exam this week, which included an Optical Coherence Tomography scan, and though I trust my doctor with it, it was hardly coherent for me!

With that said, I do not defend a Trinitarian theology on the basis of any logic. It is a doctrine that defies logic. And, on the other hand, I do not defend it by claiming it is a kind of truth, divinely revealed in its illogic. In other words, some people make it sound

as if the lack of logic is in some way proof of its divine origin. And any lack of understanding or accepting is proof of (your) lack of faith.

Probably because of the difficulty to understand it, the doctrine of the Trinity is a neglected concept, at least in regards to any practical application in the life of the believer. For many Christians, perhaps many of you, it is an idea that gets relegated to the unimportant margins of our faith life, or is renounced altogether. I understand this. Yet because I believe there are practical reasons to believe, I still defend a Trinitarian theology. But my argument in defense of this historic doctrine sounds more like this¹:

[All, Sing] Praise with joy the world's Creator, God of justice, love and peace,
Source and end of human knowledge, grace bestowing without cease.
Celebrate the Maker's glory, power to rescue and release.

“Experiencing God Beyond Us,” Marinn Bengel

[All, Sing] Praise to Christ who feeds the hungry, frees the captive, finds the lost,
heals the sick, upsets religion, fearless both of fate and cost.
Celebrate Christ's constant presence – Friend and Stranger, Guest and Host.

“Experiencing God Among Us,” Wendy Watson

[All, Sing] Praise the Spirit sent among us, liberating truth from pride,
Forging bonds where race or gender, age or nation dare divide.
Celebrate the Spirit's treasure – foolishness none dare deride.

“Experiencing God Within Us,” John G. Franklin

[All, Sing] Praise the maker, Christ, and Spirit, one God in Community,
Calling Christians to embody oneness and diversity.
Thus the world shall yet believe when shown Christ's vibrant unity.

¹ At this point in the sermon the organ began to play and the congregation sang the words of the hymn “Praise with Joy the World's Creator.” Between the verses three members of our congregation gave personal testimonies of their experience with one of the aspects of a Trinitarian Experience. The three testimonies are printed at the end of this sermon.

The proof of a Trinitarian Theology is neither its logic, nor its illogic, and I believe it is derived not so much from a divine origin as from the human side of the equation.² Science proves its claims by empirical testing; the things of spirit are proven by a different method altogether. How do you prove honesty or love? Trust or commitment or faith? We prove these things, which are more important to our living than virtually any scientific experiment, by the only method that has any lasting value for the human creature.

We prove all that is most important to us by our experience.

In a quip that has become famous from a 1964 case in the Ohio Supreme Court, Justice Potter Stewart said regarding pornography:

I shall not... attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it...³

As I understand the development of a Trinitarian theology, this is about what the Church said. “Though we cannot define God... we know what we have seen. We know what our *hearts and minds and souls* have experienced – and this Trinitarian Experience it has become our *strength*” (Mark 12).

As converts of first century Judaism, the large majority of the early church had a clear definition of God: the all-powerful, unapproachable, mysterious, Holy Other. God’s

² If God’s very nature is Trinitarian, then it has been so eternally. A Trinitarian theology, however, developed in time, over time. I find it inappropriate and unhelpful to conceive of God in such anthropomorphic terms that we might say anything like, “God planned this (to be revealed as a Trinity) from the beginning.” As God, being in this regard completely “other” than human, and outside of the boundaries of linear time, God does not “think” or “plan” and there is no “from the beginning” – God simply is. (See below, but I am devoted enough to my Jewish roots to claim this affirmation, based on God’s claim to Moses. (Moses: “What is your name?” Yahweh: “I am that I am.” God just is.)) My claim, therefore, rests in the eternal nature of God, but the more important temporal experience of God in human history. “More important” because if not for the human experience and our actual history, we would not be discussing it today. God will always be God – whatever theologies we develop to describe God.

³ Found at <http://www.aegis.com/law/Sct/Decisions/1964/378US184.html>. U.S. Supreme Court, *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, (1964).

name was not to be spoken and no image was to be made or conceived to fashion God.⁴ Just recently as I spoke to the teenaged confirmation class of Temple Israel, one of their adult leaders questioned my understanding of God's incarnation in Jesus. "Torah warns us," he said, "that idolatry is possible when we set our minds on any image. God is that great mystery which is beyond any image."⁵ I replied by saying, "Such respect, reverence and holiness is one of the great contributions of Judaism, and it may in fact be missing from the language of contemporary Christianity, which has made God into our best pal." (You know, Andy – "And-y walks with me, And-y talks with me, And-y tells me I am his own..."⁶)

But a God who cannot be conceived is a God who is difficult to give anything to but fear. When the disciples looked back on their experience with Jesus, they were aware that this experience was totally different from their experience of the wonderful, terrible, mysterious Other. Yet... no other language seemed to fit. They had experienced more than a great man... more than a true prophet... more than a mysterious visionary. It did not happen instantly, but finally the Church mustered up the courage to describe its experience: "*And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us*" (John 1)⁷. Hardly the God of Otherness, yet they believed that in Jesus they had experienced God.

⁴ The divine name, as given to Moses (YHVH), was never pronounced in ancient Judaism. Instead, the vowels from the Hebrew word for Lord (Adonai) were inserted into the tetragramaton (from the Greek, meaning "four letters"), to render Yahweh. In English this becomes Jehovah. The prohibition against images is the second commandment (Exodus 20.4), and was extended by rabbinical tradition to include *any* image.

⁵ I have now hosted the confirmation class three times, and always enjoy our dialogue. This was a fascinating and cordial conversation, which so clearly expressed this basic difference in the two religions. Jewish theology, by virtue of its interpretation of the commandment, is unable to conceive of God in any single event, image, or person. "*Becoming flesh*," at the core of Christian faith, is an understandable nonstarter for Jews!

⁶ The refrains of the hymn, "In the Garden," has been humorously used to characterize our domestication of God. The actual lines are: "And he walks with me, and he talks with me. And he tells me I am his own."

⁷ Most scholars put the date of John's gospel near 100 CE, and it was not until the great councils of the fourth century that the doctrines of the divinity of Christ and the trinity were fully codified.

And then he was gone and it happened again – yet another qualitatively different experience of God. It was “spiritual” like their experience of the Mysterious Other, yet it was an experience within. It was as tangible and personal as their moving experience with Jesus, yet it was “spiritual,” no physical touch or human voice was needed. The Church took these experiences of God to heart, and they dealt with them as the Church always and only can do. It was neither clean nor easy, but through the deliberate and clumsy process of time, the Church settled on words that, even as it was affirming them, it knew they would be misunderstood and abused. Words which the Church surely knew might even be an embarrassment at times, and whose liability could become an impediment. But it settled on these words, because nothing else matched the experience they had just known. God beyond. God among. God within.

Three different experiences. One God.

If we can let the words continue to point us to these experiences of God, rather than worshipping the doctrine they have become, as you have heard today, the Trinitarian Experience will remain a living testimony to the God of human experience.⁸

Have you ever said to someone, “You’re not going to believe this, but...”? (“I can’t make this make sense, but this is what happened...”) Logic is not always the best communicator of human experience, so a Trinitarian theology is practical because it reflects this reality. It is the language of the experience of a people, past and present, who are trying to understand and recognize the paradox of the God, whom Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “The beyond in our midst.”

⁸ In his book, *The Soul of Christianity*, Huston Smith says, “Christianity is basically a historical religion. That is to say, it is founded not on abstract principles but on concrete events, actual historical happenings.” The doctrine of the Trinity did not emerge in some ivory tower, but in the experiences of ordinary people.

And a Trinitarian theology is practical, perhaps most importantly, because it makes clear that the ultimate nature of God is self-giving and not raw power, community and not isolation, love and not brute force. I said to my young Jewish friends, the importance of a Trinitarian theology is not so much that God is three-in-one, and not five-in-one or fifteen-in-one (it's not the math that's important).⁹ The power and truth of the Church's experience, is that God is not just one.¹⁰ If God is, at the very heart of God's nature, a community of mutual sharing, a dance of co-equal partnership, a unity in diversity, and we are created in that image, then let us live that it may be said of us that we are a people who believe in respect and diversity and equality and sharing and unity and community and that our experience of the God who is beyond and among and within us is made explicit in our effort to communicate that experience: That they will know we are Christians, by our love.¹¹

May it be so. May it be so. And may it be so!

⁹ For more on this, see my 2003 sermon, "Trinity – Math or Myth."

¹⁰ Some, even within our own congregation, will insist that what I have described today is simply the Church's experience with the One God – but this need not be confused with the illogical/unhelpful language of Trinity. To this I would respond that (as noted) I believe theology is always more a matter of human reception and need than divine decree. We create our theologies out of our experiences – and owe it to ourselves to use the language that best fits this experience. Again from Huston Smith: "Religion begins with experience – ritual, belief, and experience, and (to echo the cadence of St. Paul's aphorism) the greatest of these is experience. The experience of things that inspire us gives rise to symbols as the mind tries to think about these invisible, inspiring things. Symbols are ambiguous, however, so eventually the mind introduces thoughts to resolve the ambiguities of symbols and to systematize intuitions. Reading this sequence backward we can define theology as the systematization of thoughts about the symbols that religious experience gives rise to." I submit that the symbols of a Trinitarian theology convey a different kind of God than the symbol of One God – static, absolute, sovereign – and, ultimately, alone. Such symbols can, therefore, be supremely useful to humans as we seek to understand God and one another (and are worth the effort and any embarrassment or confusion they may also cause).

¹¹ Someone has said, "People tell themselves stories and then pour their lives into the stories they tell." So it is with the story of the Church's Trinitarian Experience of God.

“Experiencing God Beyond Us,” Marinn Bengel

Most of the time God feels beyond us, but have you ever felt so close to God as creator that the experience overwhelms you?

This is how it happened to me. Over spring break... We drove and drove and drove in what wasn't necessarily pretty country. It was pretty flat and pretty dry but there was nothing unusual to describe about this middle-of-know-where area in Arizona. And then suddenly we came to a place where we could see it and it was indescribable... around the world it is known as one of the seven wonders, The Grand Canyon. And it is just that... grand, as if someone suddenly painted the most beautiful picture of the Earth and it was right there in front of us..

Everywhere from east to west from north to south was this awe-inspiring... breathtaking... view of the Earth.. for me, that's when the tears started...

Why was I standing there crying?

There are very few moments in life when you look at something and it is so perfect that you know it is “of God”. The moments when my children were first born, and I looked at their tiny, precious faces and knew they were perfect creations of God. The moment that I stood in Lucerne, Switzerland with my dad and looked over the snow capped alps against a deep blue sky and he said, “I don't know but this might be what heaven looks like.” And this moment at the Grand Canyon... when it isn't something that you can describe... but you feel as if God created all this... and you are so close to God that you are literally overwhelmed...

“Experiencing God Among Us,” Wendy Watson

The Christ.....God Incarnate.....God among us. I can not tell you of some “Cecil B. DeMille” experience of God among us (for the youth and children, DeMille was a movie director from the 1920's to the 1950's, and his films were famous for grand, bigger than life, dramatic Hollywood theatrics)... but I can tell you that I have personally experienced the love of God incarnate in many ways:

I experienced God among us -

When the Blankenships and the Cramers invite me to share their Thanksgiving table each year... When I opened another birthday card from Mary Alice Doster with her signature piece of gum tucked inside... When I arrived home from college the afternoon my Mother had died to find Sue Helt and Mary McGowan there and Geneva Owen had already been there earlier...

I experienced God among us -

When Tammy King presented me with a huge basket-full of Valentines Cards lovingly handmade just for me by “all my children” in Adventure Club... When I had the flu and Margie Davidson brought Gatorade and soup to my home... When my co-worker Jann surprised me on my 40th birthday with a beautiful bracelet she made... When Margaret Knight grabbed my dinner tray Wednesday night and said “I'll take it for you Miss Wendy”...

I experienced God among us -

When Momma and Daddy were in London back in 1969 for his heart surgery and Miss Ethel Godwin picked me up and took me to kindergarten right here at PRBC... When Tom Green, who was my Youth Minister here at PRBC, and I shared a meal at Godfather's Pizza (Mr. Green loved to call it “Father God's”) and he would listen to my teenage concerns and problems... When Bill Walker presented me with a plateful of his wonderful Christmas goodies... When Linda Hefner, who was best friends with my oldest sister Jonette, sat in the sand at Holden Beach and played with me when I was a little girl... When the man I did not even know in the parking lot at Lowes saw me lifting those bags of pine bark chips and came over and lifted the rest of them into my car for me... When my boss came to my desk with two big boxes full of children's Tylenol, cough medicines, and children's vitamins and told me to take it to Cuba with me... When one of our Room-in-the-inn guests was singing as she made up her bed

for night and as we talked she began telling me of all the blessings in HER life... When my neighbor Matt rolls my garbage can up from the curb...

I experienced God among us -

When Chet Helt stood before me at the visitation when Daddy died, tears streaming down his face and he did not say a word, he just hugged me... When after the walk-thru with the shepherds at the tableau, Lydia Marik said "group hug" and our awesome youth gave me a group hug I'll never forget... When John Patterson, who was a charter member of PRBC, would knock on my door with homegrown vegetables and homemade sugar cookies... When I had a terrible stomach virus and Barbara Milford went to the store for applesauce and crackers and brought them to me...

I experienced God among us -

When I walked into Resurrection Baptist Church in Carlos Rojas Cuba on that Friday night back in November and was greeted and welcomed by the members.

God among us.....I experience it all the time.

"Experiencing God Within Us," John G. Franklin

In the summer of 1980 I had the privilege of playing with some of the finest young orchestral musicians in the country for a month long tour of Europe. Our mid-point performance was held at the base of the Alps in Innsbruck Austria's Cathedral of St. Jakob; by European standards a very modest cathedral whose nave could easily fit inside these walls.

There were rococo moldings and guilt edged statuary everywhere. Large, oval, lead-glass windows allowed natural light to filter throughout.

At one point the orchestra played "*Symphony #2*" by Howard Hanson, a romantic piece filled with soaring melodies, dark, brooding, passages, and light, virtuosic lines. A song that mirrors "life" if ever one has been written.

A sporadic summer storm began outside just as we began playing. As we played through the piece, the clouds alternated with sunshine and the most beautiful and well 'scripted' light show took place. The mood of the storm changed unerringly with the mood of the symphony. As the darker passages were played, the clouds would slowly block the light. As the lighter melodies sounded, the clouds parted and rays of golden light would illuminate everything and everyone.

The overwhelming sensation of God's spirit in that beautiful house, among that group of people and within myself left me openly weeping for joy; Joy for the beauty of it all; Joy for what we, through grace, had been able to render; Joy for being so alive with that spirit.

Fast forward 26 years...I was sitting 5 rows from the back of *this* beautiful church when the adult choir performed "*Schubert's Mass in G*". As the strings began playing I closed my eyes and just let the sound wash over me like a warm tide. When the choir began singing I was quite literally transported away from all my burdens. God's Spirit soared through me through the music. No worries, no pain...Just joy for the beauty; joy for what that choir and orchestra were rendering; the joy of being so alive with that spirit.

Jump to a month ago and Youth Sunday. They sang a simple song, only 3 chords. A song about keeping the spirit within you and being able to accomplish amazing things because of it. A song accompanied by simple images of complex human emotions that can be totally transformed by that spirit. The people in that choir believed in what they were singing and they passed it on. I *know* it. I *felt* it.

SING for joy just for the beauty of it all...CRY for joy at what you, through grace, can render... LOVE with joy for being so alive with the spirit.