

One, Two, Three...?

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Preaching on:

2 Corinthians 3:17–18

John 14:16–17

I've done a lot of work in interfaith dialogue, speaking candidly and openly with believers from other faith traditions. And one of the questions about Christianity that comes up most often from other

monotheists (people who believe there's just one God), especially Muslims and Jews, is "Could you explain the Trinity to me? It sounds so crazy, I must be missing something. Please, make it make sense."

And imagine it from their perspective. Here's this religion that firmly insists that it is a monotheistic religion—ONE GOD, not many—and yet they pray to and worship what looks to the rest of us to be THREE DIFFERENT GODS. The Creator God of Abraham we're all most familiar with, and then Jesus, who was a flesh-and-blood human being, and then this third "person," the Holy Spirit, who's a little harder to define, but who shows up in various places as whispers in the night, or blowing winds, or descending doves, or tongues of fire, or the still, small voice within. That is a little confusing to people outside of the Church and, if we're being honest with ourselves, it's also a little confusing to some of us inside the Church.

But I actually think trying to square the circle here is a bit of distraction. The mistake I think that we make over and over again as Christians is trying to intellectually define and understand the unchanging, eternal nature of what God is, who God is, what God has always been. There have been so many books and creeds written trying to diagram how it is that God is both one and three at the same time, and where the three persons come from, and how they relate, etc. etc.

In some ways, all these attempts remind me of medieval bestiaries. In the old bestiary, you'd have an entry for a rhinoceros, but reading the entry it was clear that the author had never seen a rhinoceros, nor even met anyone who'd ever seen one firsthand. It was all hearsay, and legend, and imagination that bore very little resemblance to the actual animal—like a weird game of zoological telephone. The important thing about the Trinity is not to categorize God or exhaust God through explanation. It's not important that it's logical, or consistent, or inoffensive, or exactly as we have traditionally described it, the important thing about the Trinity is what it tells us that God is doing in our lives and in our world.

This is a fascinating aspect of this to me. It is really hard to overestimate the shift in religious and spiritual consciousness that occurred when Jesus' disciples (who were traditional "one equals one" monotheists) began to realize for the first time in human history that their understanding of God's nature was holding back their ability to live into what God was showing them and doing among them. Jesus' resurrection shifted the consciousness of the disciples from "God can only be this one thing" to "God can be more than one thing?! God can be God and Jesus at the same time?!" And eventually this seismic shift in consciousness was rounded out at Pentecost with a trinitarian understanding of God.

This was a revolution in the making. God is doing something new with us and for all intents and purposes it looks to us from our perspective that God is changing. This idea that God could at once be unified and diverse and that our understanding of God should not be based on what has defined God intellectually in the past but should be based on what defines God in our experience right here and right now, this idea began to spread over the decades and centuries to the wider Greek and Roman culture. And the world freaked out and spent a lot of time and energy trying to put the genie back in the

bottle, trying to convince everyone that, in fact, God hadn't changed and that God had always been a Trinity and always would be a Trinity. And this carefully described and contained Trinitarian doctrine became the new intellectual knowledge and belief that everyone would be indoctrinated into, which undermines, at the very least, the experience of the total, ecstatic, wild and mysterious revelation that the disciples were offering to all of Western culture and beyond—as our experience of God grows, God seems to grow with us. As we evolve, God seems to evolve with us. The heretical implication, what all the creeds and diagrams and dogmas are trying to arrest here, is that as we continue to experience our faith, as we continue to grow, as we continue to evolve, God will also continue to grow, to respond, to evolve, and to change for and with us. Our understandings of God, by definition, will always be incomplete.

Jesus was a unique person—a person who embodied in his life, in his ministry, in his teachings and healing, in his relationships, the potential for this shift in God consciousness within all of us. Jesus taught us that God in our loving Father, shifting us away from royal, kingly metaphors for God. A king sits on a throne, somewhere in a palace far away, far removed from ordinary people by orders of magnitude. But a parent lives with you in your own house. A parent is not just a distant symbol of order, a parent is close to you. You can know your parent personally. And as we discover, as we grow up, as we lose our parents to distance and age and death, your parent lives on intimately inside of you.

And this is exactly where Jesus tells us to look for God and the “Kingdom” of Heaven—within us. And if God's Realm is within us, then we, as Paul said in our reading this morning, “are being transformed into God's image” from within, from the Spirit. And if God is within us, then as we change, then so too does God. This is not to say that we define God. Quite the opposite, in fact. It's God who is defining us, but in the process of defining us, God is also responding to us, growing with us. It's the Holy Spirit now who represents this inner reality, this dynamic and intimate connection with the divine. The Spirit is not some abstract concept or distant third wheel in the Trinity. The Spirit is the living presence of God moving within us, changing us, evolving with us.

So, what would I say today to our interfaith friends asking me to make sense of the Trinity for them? I'd tell them the Trinity isn't some theological puzzle in need of solving, but a living, evolving relationship that must be experienced to be believed. The Trinity is proof that we can't put God into a box of our own definition and understanding. God will always be breaking open our boxes. And the Trinity, as we have traditionally defined it, is proof that we're always going to do our best to stick God back in the box, once God has gotten out. But thank God, that is truly a hopeless endeavor. It may give us stability and security for a time as we adjust to the new thing that God is doing among us, but eventually, there will always be another new thing, there will always be another level, there will always be a greater consciousness.

The Trinity as I understand it, is a narrative of change. God the creator was up in Heaven. But God decided to come down to earth and enter human existence in the person of Jesus. Jesus departed this earthly life for heaven, but showed us that heaven is no longer above us, it is within us. And from that

inner relationship, we Christians experience the Holy Spirit transforming us from within and responding to our own growth and change and love and compassion. And as we change, and as we change the world around us, God too grows, evolves, stretches out with us to meet a new horizon, a new hope, a new way.

So, to my interfaith friends, and to my Christian friends, too, I would say: The Trinity is a profound reminder that God is with us every step of the way, not a distant or static being, but a fluid, evolving presence that breathes change into the very essence of our lives and in turn, is changed along with us.