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The First Sunday After Pentecost: Trinity Sunday

"Trinity, anyone?"

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*Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31**Psalm 8*[Romans 5:1-5](#)[John 16:12-15](#)*"God who is One, you create us in diversity; God who is Three, draw us into unity." Amen.*

I had to chuckle on Friday evening when I got down near the end of Stephanie's remarks in this week's E-Messenger, where she describes the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit celebrating in their own "love-driven eternal dance of the Holy Trinity; the perfect picture of a community of persons separate enough to dance together, but fully united as the great indivisible ONE." ¹

For one thing, whether I heard her use this before or from other sources I've been reading, this dance metaphor is one way many people have tried to explain the inexplicable reality, doctrine, concept, what-have-you of the Trinity. But "dance" was already in my head anyway for my opening sentence, since I felt I should have been listening to Johann Strauss these past three days as I waltzed back and forth about what I would finally settle on for this sermon!

There were several possibilities, and even now, I can't believe I finally chose to grapple with the Trinity! Like many of you, I've sat through plenty of sermons on this always hoping that somebody would finally preach about the Trinity in a way that – Shazaam! – would resolve my confusion and lack of clarity and crack this open for me once and for all.

Unfortunately – but for reasons I now better understand – that hasn't happened yet! And in the spirit of full disclosure (which would be obvious anyway in just a few minutes), I should disabuse you of the expectation that this will occur this morning, either. Nevertheless, I've stumbled upon some helpful insights on this this past week, so I thought I would share a couple of these with you.

Of course, we all know at the outset that the term Trinity itself doesn't actually appear in the Bible. But there is considerable scriptural basis for the concept. For instance, our lesson from Romans this morning references each of the three entities: e.g. "...we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ..." and "...God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." So the concept of a triune God – three co-existing, separate but united, co-eternal Persons who constitute God – does exist in scripture, and is legitimately part of our heritage and practice.

And in our attempts over time to reduce this basically irreducible idea to something we can understand, we've derived a variety of analogies to try and help us grasp the basically ungraspable. For example, some like to explain that the Trinity is like an egg, comprised of yolk, white and shell, with none of them the egg in and of itself, but with the egg itself not an egg without all three of them. Others have used the example of water, pointing to the fact that liquid, vapor and ice are just different forms of the same entity. A little more helpful than the egg illustration, perhaps, but still not sufficiently accurate.

And another traditional example is recalled by one of our favorite writers and mentors, Fr. Richard Rohr, who remembers that "The sweet Irish nuns who taught me wisely ... held up the shamrock as a rather lovely natural symbol of the three-in-one." ² Of course, he also remembers that they advised him not to think too deeply about it, period!

And then there's Stephanie's dance metaphor I just quoted above, which I personally find more expressive and accessible. This parallels another useful description: "The Trinity is, at heart, our best if manifestly inadequate attempt to capture in words the mysterious nature of God. It has something to say about both the unity and diversity of God's work and manifestation, and about the importance of community to God and all those whom God has created and loved." ³

I like this, too, especially the part about "the unity and diversity of God's work and manifestation" and "the importance of community to God and all those whom God has created and loved." I should probably add, however, that this theologian also advises his sermon-writing readers to avoid preaching on the Trinity at all!

But I want to go back now to Richard Rohr who, as always, has some elegant and helpful perspectives to share on a host of things, and especially on the Trinity and how we approach and interpret it. Most of what follows comes from his 2009 book, *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See*. Now, I just mentioned "mystics" so if you find yourself already starting to tune out because of the title, just hang with me a minute, and be assured that this is not a primer on Eastern spirituality. As a Franciscan of some 30-plus years, Richard is intrinsically focused on how to enlarge and deepen our Christian understanding and life.

He candidly admits, however, that he has been characterized as having “a fixation for trying to see almost all things as both/and [vs. either-or] – or as a ‘collision of opposites.’” Thus, he believes that “one of religion’s main tasks was to give us that eye for paradox and mystery....”⁴

For Richard Rohr, “Wisdom sees all things at once and does not divide the field. Wisdom is never mine, but always a shared experience. Believers would say it is a participation in the very life of God. Wisdom is inherently shared – the Holy Spirit, the collective unconscious, if you will. You and I can never possess wisdom, but merely share in it.”⁵

With respect, then, to the paradox of the Trinity, he begins by noting that: “The way we think [in the Western tradition] ... is founded on three simple principles of logic that can be found already in Greek philosophy.” Now, since I managed to avoid any formal coursework in logic or philosophy throughout my entire 6 years of undergraduate and graduate education, it clearly will be best if I just quote him here as he describes these three “sequential and linear” principles:

1. *The Law of Identity*: A = A. A thing is the same as itself (and no two things are exactly the same).
2. *The Law of Contradiction*: If A = A, then A cannot be B (that which is not A).
3. *The Law of the Excluded Middle or Third*: A cannot be both A and B at the same time.”

Rohr maintains that these principles are at work in all of us in the West, consciously or not; that “...you don’t have to know them consciously to follow them.” He notes “They served us well in terms of the scientific and industrial revolution, in terms of measurements and math, and most day-to-day life ... but that they have severe limitations in other areas, such as science, philosophy, theology, and astrophysics....” In fact, he points out, “...these Greek principles of logic are reductionistic and not always true at all.”⁶

“Trinitarian theology,” Rohr says, “was almost made to order to humiliate the logical Greek mind: It said, the Father is the Father, but the Father is also the Son, and in fact, he is the Father and the Son at the same time, which relationship is, in fact, the Holy Spirit.” Rohr continues: “If actually encountered and meditated on, the doctrine of God as Trinity breaks down the binary system of the mind.” And, “For a Christian who lives in a Trinitarian spirituality, it makes either-or thinking totally useless.”⁷

We come away from this, then, with the clear understanding that Fr. Richard suggests we embrace the doctrine of the Trinity as the paradox it is, in part because “...the great dogmas of the church are almost always totally paradoxical.” By way of example, he cites Jesus as both human and divine, God as both One and Three, Eucharist as both bread and body. Unfortunately, he says, “Because paradox undermines dual thinking at its very root, the dualistic mind immediately attacks paradox as weak thinking or confusion, separate from hard logic.”

But “The history of spirituality tells us that we must learn to accept paradoxes, or we will never love anything or see it correctly ... Each of us must learn to live with paradox, or we cannot live peacefully or happily even a single day of our lives. In fact, we must even learn to love paradox, or we will never be wise, forgiving, or possessing the patience of good relationships.”⁸

This brings us, then, back very close to what Stephanie was trying to get us to grasp in this week’s E-Messenger. I will add that as I wrestled to come up with my own metaphor for this, just as the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are separate yet indivisible entities, I recognize that each of us here are, of course, also separate. I come here each week as me, and you come here as you, and those to our left and right and in front of and behind us all come here as their individual selves.

But the beauty and the magic and perhaps best of all, the grace, of this is precisely as Stephanie has shared, that “When we finally realize that in our family of faith there is no ‘us and them’ but only ‘US’ and when we finally see that our church is not made up of programs and special interest and activities, but made up of all of us joined together as one community -- well then, God smiles upon the earth and Father, Son, and Holy Spirit celebrate in their own love driven eternal dance of the Holy Trinity; the perfect picture of a community of persons separate enough to dance together, but fully united as the great indivisible ONE.”

I will finish, then, with another appropriate Celtic prayer:

“Triune God, who delights to bring diversity in unity, bring unity to our diversity.” Amen.

1. The Rev. Stephanie E. Parker, “Celebrating Community at St. Stephen’s,” E-Messenger, St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church, Seattle, WA January 11, 2013
2. Richard Rohr, *THE NAKED NOW – Learning to See as the Mystics See* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009)
3. David Lose, “Hope in the Meantime,” May 21, 2013, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=2588>
4. Richard Rohr, *Ibid.*, 9
5. *Ibid.*, 146
6. *Ibid.*, 149-150
7. *Ibid.*, 150-151
8. *Ibid.*, 144-145