

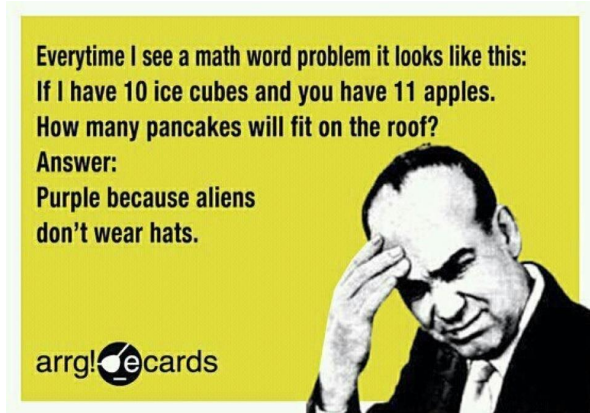
Trinity B
May 26, 2024

St. Paul's Port Townsend

Isaiah 6.1-8
Ps 29 or Canticle 13
Romans 8.12-17
John 3.1-17

Remember back in your school days when you had to figure out those dreadful math word problems? You know, something like: If a train leaves Chicago going 80 mph heading west and a bus leaves Seattle heading east five hours later, stopping every hundred miles for fuel, at what milepost on I-90 will they meet?

I always hated them and never did learn how to figure them out! I came across a cartoon bemoaning the difficulties of these math word problems. There was a picture of a very puzzled person, scowling, and holding their head. It said, "Every time I see a math word problem, it looks like this: If I have 10 ice cubes and you have 11 apples, how many pancakes will fit on the roof? Answer: Purple because aliens don't wear hats."



I tucked it into my Trinity Sunday file because that is often how people feel about trying to understand the Trinity we claim God is. It fits right in there for monotheistic clarity with $1+1+1=1$.

Countless books have been written on this doctrine that we celebrate today. It's the only Sunday in the entire lectionary which isn't focused on the acts of God or the life and work of Jesus.

I know of people who very intentionally stay home from church on this Sunday because the whole notion of Trinity sounds like ice cubes and pancakes to them. St. Augustine helpfully put it nearly 2000 years ago: "If you understand it, it is not God."

The Trinitarian language of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit has been around since biblical times, even if we have often now amended the language to be less patriarchal. Matthew used it in the Great Commission at the end of his gospel: go into the world baptizing and making disciples in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Paul blesses in the name of God, Jesus, and Holy Spirit. "Trinity" is not a word found in the bible; but the experience of God in three different ways fills scripture.

I'm guessing that none of us came here today hoping for a theological explication of the doctrine of the Trinity as our heart's deepest desire. What we more likely came for is a deepening of our understanding of God, an experience of the holy, and a closer relationship with Jesus. Probably just about what Nicodemus was looking for.

Do you think Nicodemus left during the night because he was anxious to converse with the uncreated Second Person of an undivided Trinity of Persons? Or so that he could discourse with the Word made flesh? He had no inkling that Jesus is *the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God.*

Nicodemus went to Jesus because he recognized Jesus as having been divinely commissioned and he knew that Jesus has come from God because of the signs and good works Nicodemus has seen. Jesus teaches him that he must be born again, or born anew, through water and the spirit to enter the Kingdom of God. Nicodemus gets hung up, as we often still do, on trying to hear Jesus in a literal way. What? Go back into the mother's womb? How many pancakes on the roof? How can these things be?

Chris Blumhofer writes that Jesus does not try to accommodate Nicodemus; he is trying to unsettle him. The disorientation that Nicodemus must feel is also the beginning of his conversion. Blumhofer continues to write that Nicodemus doesn't know it yet, but he will eventually speak out for Jesus among his peers and minister to him at the tomb.

In those times in our lives where we are most keenly aware that the world has changed, like now; that we lack control, like now; and that all the balls have been thrown into the air, like now, God's grace comes at precisely the moment God begins disrupting a whole way of life.

This is conversion – accepting new bearings and direction, surrendering to a new orientation to God whose description defies the limits of our language.

There is a little [video ditty you can find online](#) about the Trinity and a conversation of two cartoon fellows with St. Patrick. Patrick suggests many analogies for describing the Trinity – water, ice, vapor; three leaf clover; sun light heat; wife mother daughter. They are all rejected as heresies and then an exasperated Patrick launches into theological doctrinal language which sounds akin to all the Pentecost languages on top of each other! Other than theologians and perhaps seminary students, I don't think anyone can make sense out of it.

Human beings have been trying to find words for their experience of God since before there was written language. It may be impossible, and we gratefully release the need to describe, and give way to the mystery of a God of relationship; a god of community.

One of my favorite theologians, the Rev. Samuel Torvend from Tacoma who is long-time beloved faculty at PLU, wrote about his first year of teaching. A conservative evangelical student stopped him after the first day of class and said, "I think I might be able to continue in this course if I know that you've accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior." He was momentarily startled by this request, since he'd been hired for his expertise, not religious beliefs. In reply, he said, "I appreciate your concern – but I have to say the request implied in your statement is just too small for me." "Too small?" the student asked, with an equally startled look on his face, perhaps thinking something like "[pancakes]?" "Yes," Samuel said. "For you need to know that the God I worship is larger than Jesus; that the God I worship is a community, you might say, a communal God."

Samuel continues to say that, particularly in American Christianity, pat answers are desired and there are plenty of places that you can go for unequivocal “answers,” but not here, for at the heart of Anglican spirituality is a willingness to engage the complications and the richness of our lives lived with God, refusing to reduce God and our lives to saccharine stories and safe sound bites. Instead, we find in our communal God a helpful way of expanding, rather than diminishing, our experience of life on this earth with other human beings.

It became a far richer notion that there is diversity in our communal God and that such diversity is witnessed everywhere in the creation and that such diversity is the norm, not the exception in life.

Jan Richardson wrote and painted of the Trinity not merely as an idea to be grasped and analyzed, but a mystery to be experienced and a relationship to be entered into. She asserts that “while understanding ‘being born from above’ [and God as three in one] are important and things to be worked toward, what Jesus desires most for us to grasp is the love of God:

The love that sent Christ into the world to show us the face of God;
The love that claims us and calls us;
The love that invites us to enter into relationship with the One who dwells in mystery yet seeks to know us in the midst of everyday life.”

A thought-provoking statement is that the Gospels account for less than a year of Jesus’ three-year ministry. That means that for two out of every three days, the evangelists must have scratched their heads and said, “Nope, nothing to report about that day; Jesus was doing the laundry or sweeping the shop.” [M. Craig Barnes]

That ordinary humanness sanctifies the ordinary things that take up most of our lives. Working, cleaning, shopping, reading, playing, paying bills, going to school. We have just left the season of Easter and passed beyond the Day of Pentecost. That means we have entered a new season, often called Ordinary Time.

We cleverly call it the Season after Pentecost, but either way it is a time that we settle into the ordinary routines of our lives and are beckoned to seek God not only in the dramatic times such as Lent and Easter, but God who also meets us in the rhythms of our daily living, in the rituals which give order to our days, in the relationships which reveal the God who inhabits every corner of our lives. [Richardson]

The words we use to describe our experience of the diversity of God matter less than meeting God the Creator in the beauty of a rhododendron or the power of the tide, knowing that God the Redeemer weeps with us in sorrow, in Gaza or when the coral reefs die or basic human rights are assaulted, and encountering God the Sustainer who stirs the water and unsettles us into an ongoing, daily process of sanctification and conversion.

The night prayers in the New Zealand prayer book speak of the Trinity as Earth Maker, Pain Bearer, and Life Giver. Today’s affirmation of faith from the Iona Abbey affirms the God above us, beside us and within us. The fundamental reality of God is relationship; it’s community.

Even God's self is a community of persons, however we imagine that. The theologians may make it sound like pancakes on the roof using unintelligible words; but we experience it as love.

Every day we are invited into loving relationship with God that we know three different ways. The Celts have long used the symbol of spirals to signify the Trinity, evoking the energy, interconnection and mystery of the triune God, worked into this beautiful stole designed for my ordination. There are three spirals with a cross over the middle spiral. The intersection of the three have a bit of gold in them to highlight the Celtic understanding of a place of both meeting and mystery.

Heresy though it may be, I think the three spirals are a right fine symbol for the interconnectedness of these three parts of God and they are also a way for to see ourselves. They remind us that we can never exhaust the images we use to describe the one who holds and sends us, who enfolds us and also turns us outward, ice cubes and apples notwithstanding.

We are to be a living sign of the Trinity who dwells in eternal, intertwined relationship with God and with creation. As individuals and as communities and the church we are beckoned to times of spiraling inward, to attend to our own souls. We are then, in turn, propelled outward, to attend to the world beyond us.

But with all this turning, with all the mystery and surprising revelations of God, we are always held, because the spirals do not end and the presence of God persists, dependent not on the naming, but the loving relationship God creates with us, bound in the center by the mystery which surpasses all understanding.

Gail Wheatley+