

A Spiral-shaped God
A Trinity Sunday Sermon
June 7, 2009
Isaiah 6:1-6; John 3:1-17
by Dr. Frank Trotter

A woman walking along a California beach is deep in prayer when all of a sudden she says aloud, “Lord, grant me one wish.” To her astonishment, she hears a voice from the heavens saying, “Because you have tried to be faithful, I will grant you one wish.” The woman says, “OK, then build a bridge to Hawaii so I can drive over to visit my family anytime I want to.” God says, “You know, your request is very expensive, even for me! Think of the logistics of that kind of undertaking – the supports required to reach the bottom of the Pacific, the concrete and steel it would take. I can do it, mind you, but it is hard to justify a frivolous bridge. Ask me for something that is more within the realm of reality.” The woman thinks for a long time and finally says, “Lord, I wish that I could understand men – what they feel inside, what makes them tick, and why they keep all of their feelings inside.” There is a long moment of silence and then God replies, “Would you like that bridge in two lanes or four?”

There are many mysteries in life that seem daunting at best and well nigh impossible to figure out at worst. Not only is it difficult to figure out what makes men tick, it’s also just as difficult to figure out what makes women tick. And then there is the Creator who calls all of us into being. How do you describe someone or something that is never seen, let alone communicate with it?

Across the centuries, all religions have sought to explain the essence of their beliefs to both believers and non-believers. Christianity, along with Judaism and Islam, describe themselves as “monotheistic” – meaning a belief in a single deity. In Judaism, that deity is called “Yahweh,” “Jehovah,” and “Master of the Universe,” among many other terms. In Islam, their deity is called “Allah.” And in Christianity, the two most common references to their single deity are “God,” “Lord,” and “Father” (although many contemporary believers have begun to refer to God as “Mother” as well).

But Christian monotheism is a unique kind of monotheism. It holds that God is One, but that three distinct “persons” or “faces” make up this single deity: God, the Father or Mother; God, the Son, and God, the Holy Spirit.

The problem is that the word “Trinity” is not found in the New Testament, nor is the doctrine explicitly taught there. However, the foundations of what would develop into the concept of the Trinity can be seen in the New Testament, especially in the Gospel of John, one of the latest and most theologically developed of the New Testament books. The doctrine itself arose from the theological musings of the early church fathers, especially Tertullian, a Latin theologian writing in the early third century. Biblical scholars believe that it was he who first used the word “Trinity” – from the Latin word *trinitas*, meaning “three” – to refer to the essence of the Lord God known in one yet three ways.

And here we find ourselves today on Trinity Sunday, the annual day of the year “in which we praise and adore the infinitely complex and unfathomable mystery of God’s being to which we point when we speak of the Holy Trinity.”¹ If pastors are supposed to explain to their congregations what the Trinity means, I might re-imagine the joke I told earlier. If God asked the woman if she wanted two lanes or four, I might gather up my gumption and ask the Almighty, “Would you just tell us if you are one God, or three?”

What the Bible does tell us about the nature of God is that it is a deep and unfathomable mystery. When the prophet Isaiah tries to set down in words what his vision of the Lord’s throne room was, he writes: “I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.’ The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.”²

Perhaps the author of the Gospel of John comes closest to describing the nature of the Trinity. In one of the most famous passages in the New Testament, Jesus says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”³

¹ Hoyt Hickman, Don E. Saliers, Laurence Hull Stookey, and James F. White, *The New Handbook of the Christian Year* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 236.

² From Isaiah 6:1-8 (NRSV).

³ John 3:16-17 (NRSV).

It is this connectedness between the mysterious, invisible yet loving God who sends the Son into the world that provides the foundation for the doctrine of the Trinity. And it is the work of the Holy Spirit that keeps all those who believe in him in eternal life rather than perishing.

Over the centuries, theologians and philosophers gradually began to look for images or artistic motifs to describe the mystery of the Trinity. Carl Jung, one of the founders of modern psychology, proposed that symbols appear to us when there is a need to express what thought cannot think or what is only divined or felt. He believed that reoccurring symbols appear among differing peoples and cultures – shared symbols he called “archetypes.” Joseph Campbell called these symbols “mythic images” that lie in the unconscious where humans are no longer distinct individuals, where our minds widen and merge into the mind of humankind

Perhaps the most common motif for the Trinity over the centuries is the equilateral triangle, one of the basic shapes of geometry – a polygon with three corners or vertices and three sides or edges, all of which are equal. If you would like to see some of the ancient symbols of the church that depict the Trinity, go over and walk through the Chapel to see several triangles depicting the mystery of the Godhead in the stained glass windows created by Judson Studios in South Pasadena.

However, perhaps the oldest motif or symbol for the Trinity is believed to be the one found on a marker or tombstone in Newgrange, Ireland. It is a “petroglyph, [consisting] of three conjoined clockwise spirals forming a mysterious Trinity design. Christian monks in the ornate illustrations of the Book of Kell used a Celtic symbol called a triskele, a slight variation of this same symbol.”⁴

Jan Richardson, a Christian who posts her theological musings on her blog entitled “The Painted Prayer Book,” writes: “Historically, Celtic Christians offered no systematic theology by which they sought to define the nature and work of Trinity, but evidence of their experience of the triune God abounds. Beyond their artistic and symbolic depictions of the Trinity, they left a remarkable body of prayers and poetry that offer us an incarnate experience of the Trinity. In their poems and prayers, Celtic Christians

⁴ Ariadne Green, *Divine Complement* (Nanaimo, British Columbia: Palm Leaf Press, 2006), 47.

moved from the abstract to the actual; for them, the triune deity was not a theological concept but rather was deeply embedded in daily life. In the Celtic imagination, God, Christ, and Spirit are intertwined with one another and with all of creation.”⁵

She goes on to say that “in the Celtic triple spiral, there is a space where the three spirals connect. It is both a place of meeting and of sheer mystery. Its vast, vibrant emptiness reminds me that, in this life, we will never know all the names of God. Even as the Trinity evokes, it conceals. We will never exhaust the images we use to describe the One who holds us and sends us, who enfolds us and impels us in our eternal turning.”⁶

In my completely unscientific survey, it occurs to me that male theologians are more often than not drawn to the specificity the triangle as a Trinity motif, perhaps because of its specificity and exactness; while female theologians seem more comfortable with the open-endedness and therefore more mysterious spiral motif for the Trinity.

No matter which motif appeals to you the most, I would suggest that it is primarily through the person and life of Jesus Christ that we know God in the fullness of the Trinity. Virginia Mollenkott, a prominent feminist theologian, said, “Jesus made it all possible. Jesus is my Savior in the sense of making it all possible. Jesus is the one who never forgot that he and the sacred Source were one. That’s what I’m trying to remember: that I and my sacred Source are also one. Jesus talked about not speaking his own words, but speaking the words of the One who sent him. He prayed that we all would know that oneness that he felt with the Source. Human cruelty stems from forgetting who we are. We are intended to treat each other lovingly, with respect, and cherish the image of God in each other.”⁷

Writer Madeleine L’Engle, says, “The Trinity, like any other concept about God, ...is a groping attempt to explain wholeness to a fragmented race of mortals... We worship one God in Trinity, and the Trinity in Unity, reads the creed which ends with... As also there are not three incomprehensibles, nor three uncreated, but one uncreated, and one incomprehensible. Dorothy

⁵ Jan Richardson, “Trinity Sunday: A Spiral-Shaped God”, from *The Painted Prayer Book: Word & Image & Faith* (Internet blog), <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2008/05/12/trinity-sunday-a-spiral-shaped-god/>. The title of my sermon, the same as that of Richardson’s article, comes from her thoughts and imagination.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Virginia Mollenkott, *Who Is Jesus? Questions of Faith* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 50.

Sayers adds, The whole thing is incomprehensible, to which I add, Thank God! If it were comprehensible, nobody would have struggled to make it comprehensible in the various creeds of the church(es).”⁸

Albert Einstein once said, “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed.”⁹

One of the memorable moments in my life in sensing the power and mystery of the Trinity occurred at Mont Saint-Michel, a rocky island rising out of a tidal plain just off the coast of Normandy, France. It was been used as a fortress city surrounded by surging tides as far back as the sixth and seventh centuries A.D. and as a monastic community from the eighth century. You can reach Mont Saint-Michel at low tide by a single road that winds in a spiral around the island up to the very top in the island’s center where a Romanesque abbey has stood since the eleventh century. When one has walked up the single road to a magnificent holy place, one almost feels that the spiral that has brought you there continues above into the vault of heaven. And if, in one’s imagination, a human hand holds the end of the spiral, it is not a great leap to believe that it is God’s hand holding the other end on the other side.

The doctrine of the Trinity is meant to convey a sense that we are wrapped and enfolded in the Almighty’s all-encompassing presence throughout all of life’s stages – from creation by God to the incarnation of Jesus Christ to being sustained and comforted by the Holy Spirit as one steps from the present moment into God’s good future.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁸ Madeleine L’Engle, *Penguins and Golden Calves: Icons & Idols* (Wheaton, Ill.: H.Shaw, 1996), 151.

⁹ Albert Einstein, quoted at “Thinkexist.com”;

http://thinkexist.com/quotation/the_most_beautiful_thing_we_can_experience_is_the/12647.html.