

In the Name of the Most Holy Trinity, One God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

In high school, I remember there being one particular class that everyone dreaded taking: Calculus and Trigonometry. It was one of those classes that wasn't exactly REQUIRED, but it was basically non-negotiable for any of us planning to go to a good college. The teacher, Mr. Moline, was known in the hallways of Bethany Academy as being one of the toughest – he had high expectations for each of his students; he was notorious for substantial homework assignments; and his lectures were reputed to be nearly inscrutable – particularly to those of us with tendencies on the humanities end of the spectrum of the liberal arts.

In the end, like most pursuits of knowledge beyond my perceived capabilities, I got through it – and while I struggled a lot to comprehend (and also struggled to actually care about the material, which might've been part of the problem – lack of motivation) in the end, I completed the class, got a C+ (probably the lowest grade for a class in which I put in effort) and – I suppose at some level, I understood SOMETHING about “calc and trig.” I say “I suppose” because, like much of what I learned in high school, I have forgotten most of it; but in the long run, perspective has taught me that it was really more about the process of critical thinking that was a long-term benefit, than any actual ability to do complex math problems.

Among clergy people, I'd say preaching on Trinity Sunday is the church equivalent of calculus and trigonometry – seminarians learn to dread it, mostly through word-of-mouth, because after all it is one of the essential parts of our faith that is – at the same time – so hard to really wrap ones' mind around. Preachers tend to think that they have to solve the puzzle in the span of a ten-minute sermon, to the satisfaction of everyone in the room.

And maybe that's part of the difficulty – that we think of the doctrine of the Trinity as a problem that must be solved – that the unity of the three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, can be reduced to a logical formula. If the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity could be solved, by now I'm guessing it would've been, by greater thinkers than I. And yet, I still have yet to see the headline: "Young Preacher Figures out Trinity, Congregation Stunned".

Trinity Sunday, for close to a thousand years, has occupied this place in the calendar of the church year – one week after the Day of Pentecost. Paul Zahl writes that "the first half of the Christian year is used to set forth the great doctrines of the Christian [faith] – 'the acts our great Redeemer hath wrought' – the second half teaches us practical duties, our response to what God has accomplished for us in Christ. Neither is complete without the other. Trinity Sunday links those two halves together."<sup>1</sup>

"The usual and also the historic definition of the Trinity is this: The Three in One, One God in Three Persons. Beyond that, it gets, to put it mildly, complex..."

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<sup>1</sup> Zahl, Paul F. M. *The Collects of Thomas Cranmer*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999, print, pp. 68-69.

The Trinity, I think, is probably better believed in the right hemisphere of the brain – with our limited point-of-view, in this mortal coil, describing a God who is One yet being in three persons takes the power of imagination, and perhaps trust. Part of the challenge, too, is that we have come to consider belief to be a cognitive exercise – to comprehend and assent to a set of propositions.

And so, as I often do when facing matters beyond my ken, I turn to the literary – this week, as I considered preaching this difficult concept, and without a seminarian here presently to whom I could assign this Sunday, I found a refreshing take on it in the works of Tolstoy – specifically his story “The Three Hermits” abridged and paraphrased by the Jesuit priest and spiritual teacher, Anthony de Mello:

*When his ship stopped at a remote island for a day, the bishop determined to use the time as profitably as possible. He strolled along the seashore and came across three fishermen mending their nets. In pidgin English they explained to him that centuries before they had been Christianized by missionaries. “We, Christians!” they said, proudly pointing to themselves.*

*The bishop was impressed. Did they know the Lord’s Prayer? They had never heard of it. The bishop was shocked. How could these men claim to be Christian when they did not know something as elementary as the Lord’s Prayer?*

*“What do you say, then, when you pray?”*

*“We lift eyes in heaven. We pray, ‘We are three, you are three, have mercy on us.’”*

*The bishop was appalled at the primitive, the downright heretical, nature of the prayer. So he spent the whole day teaching them to say the Lord's Prayer. The fishermen were poor learners, but they gave it all they had and before the bishop sailed away next day he had the satisfaction of hearing them go through the formula without a fault.*

*Months later the bishop's ship happened to pass by those islands and the bishop, as he paced the deck saying his evening prayers, recalled with pleasure the fact that on that distant island were three men who were now able to pray correctly, thanks to his patient efforts. While he was lost in thought he happened to look up and noticed a spot of light in the east. The light kept approaching the ship and, as the bishop gazed in wonder, he saw three figures walking on the water towards the boat. The captain stopped the boat and all the sailors leaned over the rails to see the amazing sight.*

*When they were within speaking distance, the bishop recognized his three friends, the fishermen. "Bishop," they exclaimed, "We so glad met you. We hear your boat go past and come hurry-hurry meet you."*

*"What is it you want?" asked the bishop in awe.*

*"Bishop," they said, "We so, so sorry. We forget lovely prayer. We say: Our Father in heaven, holy be your name, your kingdom come... then we forget. Please tell us whole prayer again."*

*The bishop felt humbled. "Go back to your homes, my good men, 'he said,' and each time you pray, say this, "We are three, you are three, have mercy on us!"*

Anthony de Mello, in relating this summary of Tolstoy's story, says this: "I have sometimes observed old women recite endless rosaries in church. How could God possibly be glorified by this incoherent mumble? But each time I gaze into their eyes or look at their upturned faces I know in my heart that they are closer to God than many learned men."<sup>2</sup>

The great hymns of the Church and the canticles sung today suggest another way to encounter this concept: unabashed, pure, rapturous praise. The God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the God who came down from the mountain to know his people in the wilderness; the God who creates all that is -- islands and oceans and wildflowers and you and me -- wants us to know him and believe in him -- not in our postmodern, post-enlightenment way of believing, but in a manner of trust as belief. Trust that all the chaos of the world and our own lives are in God's hands -- trust that the universe and all that is has its end in this mystery we call God -- trust that our minds, limited in the present sphere, will one day see God face to face -- as a friend, and not a stranger. When taking all of this into account, perhaps the early Church and the writers of the great hymns have this one right: another possible reaction, besides endless attempts at rationalizing God's transcendent glory, is that of adoration and worship -- knowing that this God who has already done a good work in us, and in this place, will bring to fulfillment all that he has promised -- even in terms of our comprehension of who and what God is.

In the Eucharist, at this very table, where we will come together as united within in our own various kinds of diversity, in just a few minutes, we will repeat

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<sup>2</sup> de Mello, Anthony, SJ. *The Song of the Bird*. London, UK: Image, Ltd., 1984. Print, pp. 34-35.

these words from the sixth chapter of Isaiah, as the seraphim do in Isaiah's vision, veiling their faces at God's blinding glory at the foot of his throne. The clergy will bow in reverence at these words, and I invite you today, as you contemplate the mystery and majesty of this Triune God, that you will bow in awe and wonder as well – joining our voices with angels and archangels, and all the company of heaven, who for ever sing this hymn to the glory of God's Name:

“Holy, holy, holy Lord God of hosts, heaven and earth are full of your glory!

Hosanna in the highest.”

Amen.