

One of the big issues that I hear a lot about in religion today is that there are so many competing belief systems out there. There are the so called “major” religions—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, as well as Buddhism, Tao, New Age, Wicca... you name it, someone probably believes in it’s spiritual powers. Even within the major religions there are different ways of following that religion—just look at Christianity. You can break worldwide Christianity down into Eastern Orthodox and Western Catholic; then in western Christianity you have Catholic and Protestant; among Catholics there are Orthodox believers and Second Vatican believers; in Protestantism there are Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, Episcopal; somewhere in there is the Anglican church and even the Mormon church, Pentecostals, and so forth. But, if you think that it’s only today that we have so many religious belief systems competing for our attention and validation, then just do some reading about the times in which Christianity was developing—not only did you have all of the pagan beliefs that that came from the Greeks and the Romans and the other surrounding peoples, you also still had various forms of Judaism as well as multiple early Christian belief systems that were developing.

Today is the day which, on the church calendar, is called Trinity Sunday. Trinity Sunday is one of the “Special Days” on the church calendar, but it is a unique one because it’s the only “Special Day” we recognize as Christians that isn’t based directly on Scripture. There is no scriptural doctrine of the Trinity, although there are allusions to it; but the doctrine of the Trinity developed as the early church grew and matured and began to try to pin down just exactly what its beliefs were going to be. It was one of a countless number of events throughout the history of humanity designed to establish the “truths” for correct belief within a religious system.

So what do we mean by “Trinity”? Well, Trinity is a term in Western Christianity that describes the nature of God in relation to Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Now, back in the day—back in the early days of the Christian church—this relationship wasn’t as well defined for early believers as it is today. In fact, there was quite a bit of debate about whether Christ *was* God, or if Christ was *created by* God. If you believed that Christ was God then Christ couldn’t be the Messiah that was foretold in the Jewish scriptures, and if you believed that Christ was created by God then he was merely human. The role of the Spirit wasn’t very well defined, either; with some groups wanting to minimize it as a one time occurrence that happened only at Pentecost.

It really all comes down to thinking about the nature of Jesus Christ and the relationship between God, Christ and Spirit. Because Christianity developed as an offshoot of Judaism, Christians claim the God of the OT as their own God. But because of the traditions surrounding the birth of Christ, and the fact that he was considered to be the Messiah, from early on his followers affirmed belief in his deity. The problem is that Christians affirm belief in the One God, the Holy one of Israel—so how could there be another? This problem was answered by establishing Jesus as the Son of God—in other words, as a part of God coming from God. It wasn’t hard to do this, because Jesus himself called God *father*. In a similar way, Jesus speaks of sending a helper, an advocate to be with his followers; it came to them in the rush of wind and flames on the day of Pentecost and was understood then to be the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit.

Now I said before that there’s no scriptural doctrine of the Trinity, and really there isn’t anywhere that the Bible says, you will believe in the 3-in -1 Trinitarian God. But there is one place in scripture that Christians have drawn on to come to this formulation. It’s in today’s scripture, Matthew 28:16-20. This short passage is known as the giving of the Great Commission. This even takes place after Jesus has died, after Jesus has risen but before he ascends into heaven. Jesus here appears to his followers, and gives them some instructions: they are to go into the world and make disciples of all nations. The way they are to do this is to baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and teach them to obey the commandments that Jesus has given them. Now, did you catch that as it went by? The baptisms are to be made in the name of the Father, Son and Spirit—sound

familiar? Those are the three elements of the Trinity—God the Father, Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

But what are we really saying when we talk about a Trinitarian God? I like the way Frederick Beuchner puts it: “Father, Son and Holy Spirit mean that the mystery beyond us, and the mystery among us, and the mystery within us are all the same mystery. Thus the Trinity is a way of saying something about us and the way we experience God.” It is a mystery, whenever we encounter the living God. As humans we want to define our experiences through language, but it isn’t always possible, and it isn’t always clear. Understanding the Trinity is one of those situations. I’ve heard it explained in various ways: for instance, that the Trinitarian God is like H<sub>2</sub>O, which occurs in different phases. There’s liquid water, there’s solid water (or ice) and there’s water vapor, or steam. They look and act differently in nature, we perceive each mode of being H<sub>2</sub>O in a different way, but they are all still H<sub>2</sub>O. Now, there are some limitations to this analogy, because we are human and compared to God we are limited beings. Our language and understandings aren’t always complete, and H<sub>2</sub>O isn’t really comparable to the limitless grandeur of God. So you can take that analogy or leave it. Just know that we are infused, surrounded, and cradled by an immense mystery which sometimes we know as the great “I Am”, which sometimes we know as Jesus the Christ, and which sometimes we know as the Spirit of God. God is one, make no mistake, but we may experience or encounter or come into contact with God in one of these ways.

Now, if I haven’t totally confused you, I guess we might think about why this is important for us to think about and understand. First, it affirms that Christ was and is from God and isn’t merely a prophet or a good man. This is important because all of Christianity is based on this assumption. Second, it affirms the role of the Spirit in our lives—someone sent by God to be a help and support as we do the ministry set out for us by Christ. And third, it gives us language to use when we talk to others about our faith and how it works.

Today is Trinity Sunday. Today we remember and affirm the one God that we experience in three ways: as God, Christ and Spirit, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as Creator, Redeemer, and Advocate. We are invited by God to open ourselves to an encounter with God in all ways that are possible. Be open to the mystery. Amen.