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Mystery  
Wesley Mimico United Church  
May 26, 2013  
by Paul Shepherd

Based on ... texts about the trinity

I knew that I wanted to spend some time today discussing the recent meeting of Toronto Conference, so I decided to prepare a shorter sermon. Fortunately, that fits in perfectly with the fact that it is also “Trinity Sunday” this week. I mean - seriously - how long can it take to discuss an idea that has been around and discussed for over 1500 years? Surely there is nothing new to say about the trinity. We just need to forget the fact that people have been arguing about the Trinity for those 1500 years.

Of course, it’s not all that unusual to have a “named” Sunday. We have special Sundays to celebrate lots of things. But typically, special named Sundays are about events in the life of Jesus - like his baptism, or important biblical stories about other people. Often we explore a story about Jesus or other people in the Bible, and find parallels between something that was happening in biblical times as leverage for seeing how we might live differently today. Usually, our focus is on how we can live. This week is different because we are focusing on a doctrine - which is a way to think and believe - not a way to live. This week, we are being asked to reflect on the teachings of the church, rather than a story from the Bible.

I remember taking my first theological class at Emmanuel College. The subject of the Trinity came up, and the professor - Michael Bourgeois - asked students for our ideas of how we understood the Trinity. We were all first year students, but most of us had been in the church for years, and we had certainly thought about different ways to understand the Trinity. Fairly typical ideas emerged, such as the idea that God is three persons in the same way that I am three persons - a father, a son, and a husband for example. As students shared their insights, Michael dutifully took each statement and wrote a very brief summary on the board at the front of the class. When we had finished impressing Michael with our vast knowledge and great insights, we had a list of perhaps 6 or 7 different understandings of the Trinity on the board.

And then Michael did something very powerful. He pointed to each of our statements in turn on the board and named the particular heresy that each one represented. He did that to every

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single one of our statements. Not one of us had explained the Trinity in a way that had not been condemned as a heresy by the early church.

But in a way, I found it reassuring that our current ways of imagining the Trinity had all been thought of before. As students, we might all have been heretics, but at least we were classic heretics. And I always feel better when a problem that I can't solve myself has been around for a very long time.

And in a way, Michael was being gentle with us. Another theological teacher, Michael Patton, in his article entitled, "The Trinity is Like 3-in-1 Shampoo and other stupid statements" says, "I often tell my students that if they say, "I get it!" or "Now I understand!" that they are more than likely celebrating the fact that they are a heretic! When you understand the biblical principles and let the tensions remain without rebuttal, then you are orthodox. When you solve the tension, you have most certainly entered into one of the errors that we seek to avoid. Confused? Good! That is just where you need to be."<sup>1</sup>

That reminds me of the joke - loosely based on the text in Mark, chapter 8. Quoting: "And Jesus went on with his disciples, to the village of Caesarea Philippi, and on the way he asked his disciples, 'who do people say that I am?' And they told him, 'some say you are John the Baptist come back from the dead, others say your are Elijah, and others say you are one of the prophets.' And Jesus asked them, 'but who do you say that I am?'. Peter answered and said, "Thou art the Logos, existing in the Father as His rationality and then, by an act of His will, being generated, in consideration of the various functions by which God is related to his creation, but only on the fact that Scripture speaks of a Father, and a Son, and a Holy Spirit, each member of the Trinity being coequal with every other member, and each acting inseparably with and interpenetrating every other member, with only an economic subordination within God, but causing no division which would make the substance no longer simple." And Jesus answered and said, "What?"

Is God really that complicated - or is it just that humans create images of God that are so complex. In the words of the Islamic theologian Abdal Hakim Murad, "One of the virtues of the Semitic type of consciousness is the conviction that ultimate reality must be ultimately simple,

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.reclaimingthemind.org/blog/2009/08/the-trinity-is-like-3-in-1-shampoo-and-other-stupid-statements/>

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and that the Nicene talk of a deity with three persons, one of whom has two natures, but who are all somehow reducible to authentic unity, quite apart from being rationally dubious, seems intuitively wrong. God, the final ground of all being, surely does not need to be so complicated.”

*[mystery – RC bells incense and bells – UCC process and court system – New Manual]*

*[trinity – what resonates with you?]*

So what then are we left with on Trinity Sunday? We are left with doing what Michael Bourgeois suggested. We can share our own experiences of the nature of God and Trinity with each other. But instead of naming which heresy our images represent, perhaps we can more simply say what resonates with us.

For me, the Trinity is an expression that God is relational. That God could not be God without being in relationship. But I recently heard a trinitarian image I am still reflecting on: which is that the triune nature of the divine is “beyond us - with us - and within us”. And I realize that even during this worship service, all three aspects have been present in our prayers and hymns at different times.

“Beyond us”. That makes me think of God as creating. Separate from us. Outside us.

“With us”. That makes me think of God as part of our journey. Walking with us. Sharing in our joys and pain. Living in community with us.

“Within us”. That makes me think of God as sustaining. Part of each of us individually. Inseparable. Source of love. Source of life.

And perhaps that’s enough. Perhaps God does not have to be so complicated after all. Amen.