
3 = 1. Any questions?
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
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Based on ... hmmm. There are no scriptures about the Holy Trinity.

3 = 1. Any questions? No? Good. Let's close in prayer then, shall we? Or perhaps you were joking. I should actually probably apologize for the poor title for this reflection. But it's harder than you might think to come up with good sermon titles every week. Trinity Sunday was actually 2 weeks ago, but it seemed more important to talk about racism that day. But you didn't think I would forget to celebrate our annual opportunity to reflect on the meaning of "trinity". And I was naive enough to think that the title "3=1. Any questions?" would feel inviting.

But let me start further back. When it comes to questions of faith, there are generally 2 types of faith questions. One type of question is like this. "Do you believe that Jesus walked on water?" That's a question about your beliefs, and you might want to answer "yes" or "no" to the question. But I seriously doubt that anyone listening to me is confused by what I mean by the idea of someone walking on water.

[slide: walking on water]

We all agree on what "walking on water" means, and the only question is whether or not you believe that Jesus did it. The other type of faith question is like this. "Do you believe in God?" That's a question about your beliefs, and you might want to answer "yes" or "no" to the question. But instead of saying "yes" or "no", you alternatively might want to say that it depends what I mean by the word, "God". Because we all bring our own ideas of who God is to the table. Perhaps you believe in some views of God and not others. The question, "Do you believe in God" isn't really a yes/no question after all.

[slide: trinity]

Some faith questions are only questions of whether or not you believe. Other faith questions invite us to consider the meaning of the thing about which our faith is being questioned because there are many sensible alternatives. So if I asked you, "Do you believe in the trinity?", what sort of faith question is that? I mean, is the meaning of the

word “trinity” completely nailed down and we all know exactly what it means, or is the word “trinity” open to a lot of interpretation? What do you think? According to the somewhat right-wing Christian web site *GotQuestions.org*, “The trinity is a concept that is impossible for any human being to fully understand, let alone explain. God is infinitely greater than we are; therefore, we should not expect to be able to fully understand [God]. ... There is subordination within the trinity. Scripture shows that the Holy Spirit is subordinate to the Father and the Son, and the Son is subordinate to the Father. This is an internal relationship and does not deny the deity of any Person of the trinity. This is simply an area which our finite minds cannot understand concerning the infinite God.”

Their position that the trinity is impossible to understand would seem to put it into the second type of faith question category. If human beings cannot even understand the trinity, perhaps we are all completely off the hook for deciding whether or not we believe in it. I actually believe that we can understand the trinity at some level. And I will tell you why shortly. But you will either agree with my assessment - or not. If you prefer to simply be confused by the trinity, be my guest.

The classic definition of the trinity is that God - meaning the God-head (see, I have already thrown in another word which tradition dictates we need to make this complicated enough) is made up of 3 “persons”, God ... meaning the father, Jesus, ... meaning the son, and the holy spirit. So far so good. But the definition continues. The 3 persons are of the same substance as God, and yet, there is a hierarchy within the structure. This is well amplified by the very right-wing Christian web site for the *Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry*, “This subordination of order does not mean that each of the members of the Godhead are not equal or divine. For example, we see that the Father sent the Son, but this does not mean that the Son is not equal to the Father in essence and divine nature. The Son is equal to the Father in his divinity but inferior in his humanity. A wife is to be subject to her husband; but this does not negate her humanity, essence, or equality” Of course in my universe, the notion of a wife being subject to her husband definitely erases any sense of humanity, essence, and equality, and so the whole argument falls apart.

I think this leads to 2 sorts of problems. One problem is that when people crafted

the trinity, they actually did believe that people could be subservient and equal at the same time. In the 3rd century, when most of the fighting about trinity was happening, of course you had slaves and that didn't make you a bad person. The language of being subservient and equal was not jarring then. Today we have a much better sense of what "being equal" means, even as we continue to struggle with it today. Racism, sexism, and religious intolerance prove that we have not mastered "equal" ourselves, but the conversation about "equal" is not where it was in the 3rd century either.

The other problem with this way of understanding trinity is that we end up with a negative definition. Trinity is defined more by what it is not than by what it is. Negative definitions may be accurate, and may even work for the professionals, but for the rest of us, negative definitions can feel very abstract and possibly meaningless.

[slide: negative vegan]

I'd like to share a quick analogy with you. It come from the "vegan" world. Do you know the definition of "vegan?" Or course you do, it's someone who does not eat meat, dairy, or eggs, and does not use animal by-products, like leather. That's probably a correct definition, but it's defined negatively, it's defined by who vegans are not. But there are positive definitions too.

[slide: positive vegan]

Here's one, "A vegan is somebody who chooses to get their dietary protein from beans, lentils, nuts, seeds, legumes and vegetables, and who chooses to enjoy a vast array of nutrients and vitamins from fresh fruits and vegetables." That's a positive definition. In this definition the vegan not only makes a conscious choice (which is a positive right there) but also chooses from a vast array of delicious food options. Veganism is not about deprivation, even if the standard definition of vegan is about what not to eat.

So I wonder if we can find a positive definition of trinity too? I wonder if we can find a positive definition that opens us up to a vast array of spiritual encounters with the divine?

[slide: trinity and ucc crest]

I believe that the trinity was crafted in much the same way as the United Church of Canada (UCC) itself. The UCC as a denomination was crafted in 1925 from 3 protestant

denominations - and other denominations have joined since them. Each party to the union brought its own characteristic “flavour” into the mix. And the result was - and still is - a church that honours different traditions and views. A place of diversity as well as a place of union. The trinity is like that too.

Please join with me for a brief experiment. Close your eyes and just take a moment to decide what the divine feels like - or looks like - to you. What images come to your mind, your heart, your hands, your feet? Ready? Some of us will immediately imagine the divine using words like creator, father, sustainer, God. Some of us will immediately imagine the divine using words like Jesus, God with us, healing, spirit within us. Some of us will immediately imagine the divine using words like spirit, surrounding, enveloping, presence, peace. And some of us will immediately imagine the divine using combinations of these 3 descriptions.

Put simply, the doctrine of the trinity simply states that all 3 ways of imagining the divine are just fine. If you imagine the divine using images of father, or son, or spirit, you are fine. I believe the trinity was constructed as a way to honour the different experiences we have of the divine. But after the concept of the trinity was constructed, theologians and other people who like to argue about how many angels could dance on the head of a pin wanted to understand trinity at deeper levels and decided that there must be a hierarchy between the persons of the trinity, which created a lot of fighting, division, and even the occasional murder. In spite of their best mental efforts, their best explanations of trinity use highly convoluted theological principles that defy human logic. But if we use a positive definition, the trinity can also be seen as an opportunity for broadening our conceptions of the divine, opening our minds, eyes, and hearts to finding divine in unexpected places.

Minister’s sometimes use this interpretation in a simple trick. For example, usually when we have our prayers of the people, we have 3 blocks of responsive text, separated by times for your own thoughts and words. The prayer I chose for today is one I wrote awhile ago. It was created with the intention that the first responsive block will resonate with those of you who see the divine as creator, God. The second responsive block was designed to resonate with those of you who see the divine in humanity and

Jesus. The third responsive block was designed to resonate with those of you who see the divine in spiritual encounter. The intention is that all of us will resonate with at least some - if not all - of those words. We don't have to kill each other fighting about our interpretations. We simply need to let the divine speak to us in ways that resonate for us.

Discussing the trinity reminds us that there are different images of God that we all use, and we can enjoy trying to understand other people's images. We might even learn from each other. What images of God are worth exploring today?

We need an image of God that allows for religious pluralism. Our God cannot be only for Christians. At the same time, our image of God should not allow for religious intolerance and racism. We do not need a "god" who hates the same people that we do.

We need an image of God that is helpful to humans, as individuals, as communities, and globally. This image of God must give preference to the poor and powerless, not the rich and powerful.

We need an image of God that is morally progressive. A God who acts with greater morality than we do - an aspirational God. This God should enable us to reach beyond ourselves, to help us transcend our own limitations, to motivate us to imagine and work towards a better world where there is mutual respect and perhaps even love between all people.

We need a concept of God that allows us to achieve our full human potential and take responsibility for our own lives; an image of God that does not allow us to simply blame God for the situations that we are find ourselves in.

We need an image of God that makes it clear that our image of God is not complete, or final, or unique, but is yet of great value to us.

Trinity Sunday reminds us that our images of God matter, and that we can learn from each other as we share our images of God with each other. And surely, that is enough.

Is God a creator, or a human, or a spirit? Just say "Yes". And look for love in your midst. Look well, and you will find divine in your midst.

Amen.