
Trinity: God is still speaking
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on ... well look at that, there are no scriptures about the Trinity! Hmmm. Maybe we need to read the entire Bible and get the “big picture”.

[image: trust your pilot]

This week, Yvonne, Maureen, and I participated in the Horseshoe Falls Regional Council Annual General Meeting which took place online. The theme this year was “trust your pilot”. However, I had to record this reflection before the meetings, so I’ll have to tell you what I learned later on about what “trust your pilot” means. Or perhaps Yvonne or Maureen could speak to it sometime. But I am confident to say that it was a great time. It’s an annual celebration of faith - and a business meeting - bringing together people from all the United Church congregations in our Region. It’s a great time to re-connect with old friends and make new ones.

[image: centre]

So now that it’s Sunday, I am exhausted. I’m sure glad that today’s theme is a simple one. “Trinity Sunday”. What could be easier? The Trinity is an old theological idea that has been around for over 1500 years so there must be nothing left to discuss. I can already smell the coffee. Of course, to go for coffee right now we would need to ignore that fact that for 1500 years, faithful Christians have fought each other. We have sometimes even killed each other - over the meaning of the Trinity. Today of course, we can just ask Siri. “Siri, what is the Trinity”?

[siri]

“The Christian doctrine of the Trinity is commonly expressed as the statement that the one God exists as or in three equally divine ‘persons’, the father, the son, and the holy spirit ... yet the three in some sense ‘are’ the one God of the Bible.”

[image: centre]

Thank you Siri. Are you surprised that Christians before the time of Siri fought about the meaning of the word “Trinity”? I’m not. Because the Trinity says something

about our images of God, and I don't have much trouble seeing how that can lead to violence!

Are you surprised because I'm talking about images of God at all? Images of God are those images we carry around in our heads that represent who God is for us. Isn't that the same thing as God? Well, let's see. I need to start with a story.

[image: Leo]

As you know, I have a cat - Leo. He often features during our online communion. And he was one of the characters in our 2020 Brantford Nativity story. Although for a reason I cannot figure out he sounded like Dakota. Anyway, Leo is very friendly. When I come home, he greets me at the door. I rub his head and tell him about my day, and he smiles at me. I treat him as if he understands me. And that works just fine - because I am not actually delusional. If I thought he really understood me then I would have a problem. But treating him *as if* he is human just helps me to talk to him. I have an image of him as human, just because it's fun, and because it helps us relate better. And Leo has never corrected me on that.

I think that's a fairly typical way to treat pets. But I'd invite you to consider that many people do the exact same thing - with God.

[image: god's finger]

This is particularly true when we pray. Because prayer is usually considered talking with God. And our model for talking is talking with other human beings. Many Christians hold an image of God as a person, which makes it easier to pray. Can't you just picture God as an old man with a beard? OK, we may have moved beyond that particular image. But most of us hold some "person" image for God or Jesus. E.g. best friend, boyfriend (I've been told), brother, father, therapist, probation officer, or some other image of a person. Holding an image of God as a person does make it easier to pray for most people. I met someone once who told me that they had come to think of God as "energy". And then they realized they didn't know how to pray anymore because they didn't know how to have a conversation with "energy". So it's completely understandable that we hold human images of God - particularly for prayer. And if your image of God helps you pray, that's just fine. It's fine as long as you know it's only an image.

[image: leap of faith]

If you don't know what images of God you hold, one way to find out is to listen to people you disagree with. And to use their words as a sort of mirror for your own thoughts. I like to listen to "Christian radio" from time to time. The music usually puts me to sleep, but the sermons always keep me awake. Because I have observed that most radio preachers include 2 specific points in every single sermon. At some point in the sermon, the preacher will say that God is beyond our thoughts, beyond our imagination, beyond our understanding. And then at another point in the sermon (which could be 30 minutes later), the preacher will state unequivocally they know for absolute fact that "God hates [insert the name of a specific group of people, e.g. homosexuals]". And now I'm wide awake. Because I just can't make the mental jump. From believing that God is beyond our imagination to knowing with absolute certainty that God exhibits hatred towards a particular group of people. Because hatred is a very human reaction that requires no imagination whatsoever. So which is it? Is God beyond our imagination, or does God have no imagination at all?

[image: centre]

My point is that - for me - listening to Christian radio has helped me better understand my own images of God. I resonate with the idea that God is beyond our imagination and is therefore aspirational for us. The whole point of faith is to help us imagine and become better people ourselves, right? God's qualities should be something we can aspire to.

But even at that, how do we imagine God to be? What images of God are worthwhile? If you don't have a ready answer to that, maybe this can be your summer project. But for me, the God that is beyond my imagination must at the least be beyond what I can imagine in terms of being wise. And being loving. My sense of the God who is beyond my imagination is at a minimum wise beyond the wisdom I already have. And loving beyond the love that I already live out myself. And essentially, the more human an image of God is, the less I am inclined to see it as authentic. Because for me, any "god" who doesn't pass the tests of wisdom and love isn't worth worshiping, and isn't God anyway.

[image: lamatt quote]

As Anne Lamatt famously put it, “You can safely assume you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out God hates all the same people that you do.”

And that’s why reading the Bible is such an interesting task, because the God depicted in the Bible frequently fails the tests of both wisdom and love. But for me, that’s not an invitation to throw the Bible away, or to discard God. I believe that the biblical authors (generally) had legitimate experiences of the divine. But those experiences - like our own experiences of God - were just feelings. And it is always very difficult to write down feelings in concrete language. To their credit, the biblical authors attempted to write down their feelings anyway. They wrote out of their own cultures. And we ended up with depictions of God in the Bible that are sometimes far from ideal and hard to relate to today. God is depicted in the pages of the Bible, but we sometimes need to work to actually find God on those pages. Part of the “fun” of reading the Bible is to try to figure out the part of the message that is about God. And the part that is simply a reflection of the culture of the author.

[image: text 1 tim]

Let’s start with an easy one. Consider this text from 1 Timothy 2:11-14. This is St. Paul writing to the church in Ephesus about 2000 years ago. Presumably, Paul is speaking for God. But we cannot forget that Paul was also a wealthy, educated, slave-owning Roman citizen. “Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.” This text is completely sexist. What image of God do we get from this text? Is God sexist, and St. Paul is simply passing on the message? Or is it that St. Paul, a product of his culture, was sexist himself. And therefore painted God with a sexist brush? And before we criticize St. Paul too much, perhaps we should remember that he painted with the only brush that he had. St. Paul did not have a brush from the 21st century in his back pocket.

[image: centre]

I share this text as an example (among many I could have chosen) because when

we read it, we are invited to use the text as a mirror. To help us understand our own images of God. The God I believe in, the one beyond my imagination who excels in wisdom and love would not fall victim to the very human fear we call sexism. So with this text I decide that these words say something about St. Paul's culture, and nothing at all about God. The Bible is very useful as a mirror to our own images of God. By the way, the Bible also contains images of God we can affirm, I'm just starting with negative ones.

[image: text deut]

Let's try another one. Consider this text from Deuteronomy 7:6, spoken to the Hebrew people and recorded perhaps 650 years before Jesus. "For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession." This text suggests that although God created every person on earth, that God "picks favourites". That God has a favourite group of "chosen people", and furthermore, that this "chosen" status is hereditary. The idea of favouritism is a very human idea, completely devoid of both wisdom and love. In today's language, it is the very human construct we call "racism". So, is God racist, and the author of Deuteronomy is simply passing the message along? Or is it more reasonable to realize that the author of Deuteronomy, who lived in a very tribal culture, painted God with the only brush that he had. And therefore gave us a depiction of a racist God.

[image: centre]

The Bible is a fine place to start, but we have to continue the conversation beyond that. God is still speaking. The only question is, "are we still listening?"

We all choose what images of God we carry around in our own heads. And it makes a real difference too. Many people *do* actually believe that God is sexist. And they use that image to justify all kinds of irrational behaviours even today, in our society and in our homes. For example, In Canada, every six days a woman is killed by domestic violence by her intimate partner¹. Our images of God matter.

Many people *do* actually believe that God is racist, and use that to justify all kinds of violence. The recent - and ongoing violence in Palestine is testament to that. And not

¹ <https://canadianwomen.org/the-facts/gender-based-violence/>.

only the murder and violence, but the fact that so much of the world - including the Canadian government - turns a blind eye to the entire situation in Palestine. All of this caused by a perverted reading of the Bible that leads to an image of God as racist. Our images of God matter.

[image: trinity]

Of course, we have positive images of God in the Bible too. That's good news, right? However, I think the way to find those images is not by reading short quotes, as we have been doing. I believe that positive images of God are found when we read larger pieces of the Bible - and texts from other religions too - and get a sense of the bigger picture. When we consider the flow of human history, when we see how our societies make halting progress towards being more equitable. When we see evidence - in spite of many failures - that the Kingdom of God is just possibly coming after all.

The Trinity offers one such image. God - as creator, is creator of everyone and everything. And if we are all related to each other then perhaps we could do a better job of acting as if we cared about everyone. That all lives matter equally. Jesus - as one who lives with us, present in our midst. Feeling pain and joy, hope and sorrow just like we do. Who understands the emotional pain that comes from the segregation of people into "us" and "them". The Spirit - as sustainer, who connects us to God and to each other. Who is the reason that we can say as we do in our creed, "We are not alone. Thanks be to God."

[image: centre]

Perhaps we can eliminate images of God that do not live up to the tests of wisdom and love. Perhaps we can eliminate images of God that are racist or sexist, fearful or hateful. Perhaps we can hear the voice of the God who is still speaking, as long as we are willing to keep listening.

Perhaps we can embrace the image from the Trinity of a God who is wise and loving. Perhaps we can live our lives according to that image. We all choose what images of God we carry in our own heads. Choose well, because our images of God matter.

God is still speaking. Keep listening. Keep acting. Keep loving.

Amen.