
3 = 1. Any questions?
Chapel in the Park United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on ... well I'm supposed to say Matthew 28:16-20, but that's not really true.

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. And if you have not yet guessed, this week we celebrate Trinity Sunday.

But let me start further back. We have discussed this before, but we need a short recap. When it comes to questions of faith, there are generally 2 types of faith questions.
[slide: walking on water]

One type of faith question is like this. "Do you believe that Jesus walked on water?" That is 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. I mean like in this photo - someone is walking as if they on land, but they happen to be on water. We all agree on what "walking on water" means. The only question is whether or not you believe that Jesus did it.

[image: abstract 2]

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 instead might want to say that it depends what I mean by the word, "God". Because we all bring our own ideas of who or what God is to the table. Perhaps you believe in some views of God and not others. For most of us, the question, "Do you believe in God" isn't really a yes/no question if we dig down a bit.

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 the meaning of the word in question is expansive. Those questions are beautiful, because they open us to reflect, to question, to discuss, and to learn from each other.

[slide: abstract 1]

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 agree on what the word means? Or is meaning of the word “Trinity” open to many different views? What do you think?

The meaning of the word Trinity is not very clear actually. The one-line version is simple enough. That God exists in “3 persons” - God (meaning creator), son (meaning Jesus) and the spirit collectively constitute “God”. And that these 3 persons are somehow equal and yet exist in a hierarchal structure, meaning that they are not equal.

So the definition of Trinity is not logical. And it was never meant to be. This leads to interesting questions. One classic being ... if Jesus was God, who did Jesus pray to? And perhaps more importantly, why did Jesus pray at all? And the biggest head-scratcher - when Jesus was at Gethsemane, about to face his arrest and crucifixion, Jesus prayed “not my will, but yours.” That is a pretty clear statement - from Jesus - that Jesus was not God. And yet, the Church has adopted the Trinity. That is why I titled this sermon “3 = 1. Any questions?” Because the standard definition of the Trinity is a bit like saying that 3 = 1. So of course we have questions.

And the Bible offers very little help here. But wait you say - the words we read from Matthew clarify this. Those words are often called “The Great Commission” and give a direct reference to the Trinity. “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” That is true. But it is equally true that those words did not come from Matthew. And definitely not from Jesus. Those words were added by the church at a later date to provide a mechanism for church growth.

In the early church, the idea of the Trinity did not exist. The book of Acts gives accounts of early church activities, including baptisms. The early church did not baptize in the name of the Trinity.

[image: quote below]

For example, Acts 2:38, “Peter said to them, ‘Repent and be baptized every one of

you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven, and you will receive the Holy Spirit’.”

[image: abstract 1]

To be clear, I’m not saying that the Trinity is wrong. Just that the Trinity did not come from Jesus and was not part of the early church movement. The bulk of the discussion around the Trinity happened in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, being hot debated in the year 325 at the Council of Nicaea and refined in the year 381 at the Council of Constantinople. And the fighting around the meaning of the Trinity has never fully stopped. As recently as 1994 the General Convention of the Episcopal Church agreed to use the more historic version of the Nicene Creed when it next published the Book of Common Prayer. And that change impacts the understanding of the Trinity in a very significant way.

I said earlier that the definition of the Trinity is not logical - and it was not designed to be. If you find that surprising, we need to consider the purpose of creeds. The Church has a number of creeds. The word “creed” comes from the latin “credo” which means “I believe”. Early creeds like the Nicene Creed and the Apostles Creed are simply that - statements of beliefs. Modern creeds, like the “New Creed” that we use here at Chapel in the Park United Church are a bit different. And we will explore that more fully next week when we celebrate the 101st birthday of the United Church of Canada.

[image: 2 purposes of ancient creeds]

But ancient creeds only contained statements of beliefs. These creeds were used for 2 purposes. On the one hand they provided a short summary of the faith in a way that was memorizable. But the other purpose of ancient creeds was about identity. It was about knowing who was an insider to your faith group and who was an outsider. If you met someone on the street and you wanted to know if they were Christian ... asking them to recite the creed was one way to determine that. And this was not an idle task. Back in the days when Christians were persecuted by the Romans, you did not openly invite people to your church. You would have been wary of outsiders. Creeds were used to separate “us” from “them”. Creeds - and even the definition of the Trinity - did not have to be logical. They had to say something important about the faith. And they had to be

memorizable.

[image: abstract 1]

The definition of the Trinity has never settled because it is illogical. In spite of centuries of fighting to make it so. After the concept of the Trinity was constructed, theologians and other people who like to argue about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin wanted to understand the 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. And much of the fighting was about what the Trinity is NOT. And people disagreed because the meaning of the Trinity is illogical and therefore cannot be resolved through debate. But again - that was not the original point of the Trinity.

My hope today is that we will create a more positive understanding of the Trinity. Because negative definitions are not always very helpful.

[slide: negative vegan]

I'd like to share a quick example with you. It come from the "vegan" world. Do you know the definition of "vegan?" 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 defines vegans by who they are not. But there are positive of definitions of vegans 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 vegans not only makes conscious choices (which is a positive right there) but also choose 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 create 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. The comparison for me is not because of the number 3. It's that 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.

[image: trinity fluorescent]

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, sustaining, presence, peace. Some of us will immediately imagine the divine using combinations of these 3 descriptions. And some of us will immediately imagine other words.

Put simply, the doctrine of the Trinity states that different ways of imagining the divine are all just fine. Whether you imagine the divine using images of father, or child, 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 decided to make it more complicated. And for me, that was never the point of the Trinity.

The Trinity can be seen as an opportunity for broadening our conceptions of the divine, opening our minds, eyes, and hearts to finding the divine in unexpected places.

Minister's sometimes use this idea in a simple way. For example, when I offer the prayers of the people, I usually use 3 blocks of responsive text, separated by times for your own thoughts and words. And sometimes, those 3 blocks of responsive text will essentially say the same thing, but using different words. In those prayers, my intention is

that the first responsive block will resonate with those of you who see the divine as creator, God. The second responsive block is designed to resonate with those of you who see the divine in humanity and Jesus. The third responsive block is designed to resonate with those of you who see the divine in spiritual encounters. The intention is that all of us will resonate with at least some - or perhaps all - of those words. We do not 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. All of us.

We do this all the time, actually. I love the fact that different members of this congregation offer the prayers of the people. Because each week we get to hear different words, different approaches to faith. We hear prayers that represent different theologies and view of God. That is a true gift. That is the Trinity in action. Trinity Sunday reminds us that there are different images of God that we all use, and we can try to grow while we hear other people's images of God. We can learn from each other. What images of God are worth considering today?

Given the state of our world, high on my list for an image of God would be a God that promotes peace, tolerance, and love for all human beings regardless of ethnicity, religion, or any other barrier. And an image of God that reminds us regularly that our image of God is incomplete and we have to keep opening ourselves to new possibilities.

That's how I find images of God myself. But what about you? What images of God do you carry in your own hearts and minds? Where do you find inspiration?

The Trinity does not demand that we all see God the same way. It never did. It simply says - creator, human presence, spirit - all of these are valid doorways into the divine. And there are others.

Every Sunday I light the Christ Candle and say "we light this candle to remind ourselves that Christ is present in our midst." And when I extinguish it I sometimes say "the candle never mattered." Because the presence was never in the candle. It was never in the doctrine either. The presence is in you. In me. In us. In the community gathered here.

Is God a creator, or a human, or a spirit? Just say yes. And then look around. The divine you are looking for is already here. *Amen.*