

“Faith and a Three-Legged Stool”

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Based upon Gen. 1:1-5; Matt. 28:16-20; John 1:1-5

When pastor/author Rachel Keefe was training to be a minister, the first children’s sermon she had to do at her field education placement was on the Trinity. Feeling inspired, Keefe called the children forward and then took out a banana. She peeled the banana and then asked the children how many bananas she had. “One,” they answered. After making sure everyone was in agreement, she then carefully pressed her index finger into the top of the banana, separating it into its three equal component parts. “How many bananas do I have now?” she asked. Not everyone was sure now. But undeterred, she launched into an explanation of how the three parts were equal in their “banananess,” and still a part of the same banana. The little heads nodded. All seemed to be going well. Then after giving each child some banana to eat, she asked “the fatal question.” “So tomorrow morning when you have a banana on your cornflakes, what are you going to think about?” she asked. One little angelic, blond-haired, blue-eyed, three-year old enthusiastically responded, “God is bananas!”¹

That wasn’t the answer Keefe was looking for, obviously. But you can’t blame the little girl. It sometimes does seem as though God is bananas, or rather our understanding of God’s nature is. We affirm that we worship and serve only one God, in keeping with the revelation of Yahweh to Moses in the Old Testament. Yet thanks to Jesus Christ, we know that one God in three ways, as the God of the Old Testament, our Creator, Liberator, and Judge, as Jesus the Christ, our teacher, savior, and friend, and as the Holy Spirit, our guide, comforter, and sanctifier. So although the math may sound like $1 + 1 + 1 = 3$, Christian tradition holds that it is really more like $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$.

Recognizing the limitations of both basic math and traditional metaphors, contemporary scholars now frequently argue that the doctrine of the Trinity is a huge problem for the Church. I don’t know if that’s true or not. But I do know that it is hard to explain the exact nature of our Triune God, and for some people, very hard to understand as well. I know that throughout the ages, Christians eager to explain the unexplainable have made the whole concept seem so abstract and obscure that it can seem as if the doctrine has very little to do with either life in the real world or Christian discipleship. I also know that most Christians pray to the God we relate to the most and serve the God we know. Does acknowledging God’s triune nature really matter as long as we know and serve the One?

John Calvin, one of the founding fathers of Reformed Protestantism, seemed to think so. He said that ignoring the Trinity leaves “only the bare and empty name of God flitting about in our brains.”² In other words, you can’t really know God unless or until you know the Trinity. Contemporary theologian Catherine LaCugna goes even farther. She insists that the doctrine of

¹ Keefe, Rachel, “*The Joys of Trinity Sunday*,” RevGalBlogPals, posted May 22, 2018, retrieved May 22, 2018 from <https://revgalblogpals.org/2018/05/22/rcl-the-joys-of-trinity-sunday>.

² As quoted in Johnson, Elizabeth A., *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: Continuum Int’l. Pub. Group Inc., 2008), 209. Johnson’s book was an essential resource for this sermon.

the Trinity is not only essential to know and understand, “it is ultimately a practical doctrine with radical consequences for the Christian life” because it was not born out of the minds of lofty-minded theologians, out of touch with the real world.³ The doctrine of the Trinity was born in the streets, so to speak, out of regular folks’ actual experience of the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ. Therefore, if we truly want to know him, we need to know what our ancestors in the faith knew about the unique three-fold nature of our God.

The word “Trinity” does not appear in the Bible, but from the very beginning of the Bible to the end, God appears in three forms. As we heard in *Genesis* this morning, when God was creating earth, the Spirit of God moved over the waters. That Spirit breathed life into Creation, birthed the Church, as we recognized last week, and even now is at work recreating us all. Yet according to the *Gospel of John*, it is Jesus who sends the Spirit, and Jesus who was around in the beginning as the “Word,” the divine logos which the Greeks believed was the wisdom of God. “In the beginning was the Word,” John wrote, “and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” Jesus was the Word become flesh. He was God incarnate, and yet before he was visible in the flesh, he was somehow with God in the beginning, and is now with God at work in the Spirit. Flip through the Bible and you will see God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit all intermingling and working through each other. The early Christians experienced God the Father through Jesus, and experienced Jesus through the Spirit. They didn’t understand how this was, but it was so real to them that from Pentecost on they baptized new believers in the name of the “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” as Jesus instructed. For roughly three hundred years, that was enough for them.

But in the early 4th Century, a man named Arius claimed that Jesus was actually one of God’s creatures, not divine himself. This caused such a controversy that the Church felt that it needed to issue a formal response. So in 325, the head bishops from various regions formed a council in Nicaea and drafted *The Nicene Creed*, the first of what would become many Affirmations of Faith trying to explain what Christians believe. The Creed affirms that God, Jesus, and the Spirit are of the same “*homoosios*,” which is Greek for “the same essence.” But when the Creed was translated into Latin, “essence” became “persona.” So, we ended up with a doctrine which says we have one-God-in-three-persons, and a God who has frequently been depicted in fine art as an old white-bearded man having dinner with a young dark-bearded man, while a dove flies overhead. **[Slide shown.]**

Most scholars recognize now that “person” is a problematic term precisely because it congers up images in our minds like this of three distinct and separate individuals. That image is wrong because if we understand anything from the Bible, it is, as Sandra Schneider astutely observed, that “God is not two men and a bird.”⁴ But alternative metaphors seem equally problematic. God has been compared to a banana, an egg, a tree, and fire. Personally, I have always explained the Trinity by comparing God to H₂O. In the same way that we experience H₂O as water, ice, and steam, so God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are the same essence, just different ways that we experience it. But that analogy falls apart in the face of today’s scripture lesson from *John*. God would have to be steaming ice floating in water to convey that the three

³ *Ibid.* at 222, citing LaCugna’s study *God for Us*.

⁴ *Ibid.* at 208.

persons of God are distinct and together at the same time. Otherwise, we might mistakenly assume that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three modes of God acting independently.

No analogy is perfect. But given how important it is for us to understand the Trinity, I am going to throw out one more today: a three-legged stool. Each leg is distinct yet connected. Each leg is necessary, yet dependent upon the others in order to be a stool. The strength of this analogy is that it makes it obvious how problematic it is if we do not recognize three equal-length legs. A three-legged stool with a short leg can't stand. It isn't even really a stool any more. It's something broken. When we reject the Trinity in our minds and our hearts, this is what we end up with, an incomplete, broken understanding of God. Yet more and more, this is what Christians are doing. They are resting their understanding of God on one or two legs only, instead of on all three.⁵

For many Christians, the only leg that matters today is the Jesus leg of the stool. "Honk if you love Jesus," they affirm, grounding their piety and practices in their personal relationship with Christ, and focusing on the salvation they obtain through him. But without an equal God-leg, their theology is not grounded in the God Jesus of Nazareth loved, worshiped, and served. When the leg of God the Creator is short, we lose that everyone is made in the image of God and called to care for God's Creation. When the leg of God our liberator and judge is short, we lose the Mosaic covenant, which is grounded in pursuing justice in this life, not just personal salvation in the next. When the leg of the God Jesus called Abba, Father, is short, we lose the understanding that God expects certain behavior from us like a parent does.

But it's no good to lengthen the God-leg if doing so makes the Jesus one short. Many Christians in America do this now. They say they are Christians but they do not know the teachings of Christ. They say they worship God, but they still behave as if God is more judge than redeemer. They do not have the intimacy of relationship that comes from knowing God's love and forgiveness through Christ, nor do they have a clear sense that Jesus wants us to build up the kingdom of God on earth by loving our neighbors. They just want God's name to appear in our pledge of allegiance and on our money.

Even if Christ and God are equal and bound together in our hearts, however, we still need an equally-long Spirit-leg, or the stool will fall apart. Without the Spirit, God, Jesus, the Bible, and all its teachings all remain in the past. They are not immediately relevant to today. Without the Spirit, we lose the important insights the Spirit has taught us, as Jesus said she would do, about racism and slavery, women and homosexuals, justice, war, and more. Without the Spirit, we are left without a way to experience Jesus now, and to be supported by God's grace, strength, and power.

We need all three legs of the stool, and not just because each one provides us with an essential understanding of who God is, but also because the fact that there are three challenges us to set aside both the binary, either/or thinking, and the hyper-individualized thinking to which we are otherwise inclined. God exists in a living state of community, not duality or individuality,

⁵ See Migliore, Daniel L., [Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology](#) (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1991), 64-65 for a more detailed discussion of how we distort the Trinity.

and made us to live that way too. We were made to live in a triune state with God and neighbor, distinct but together, individually gifted, but collectively dependent.

Which leg of your stool is the shortest? If you think you know that answer, then spend some time reflecting on why that is. Are you short-legged on God because you haven't spent enough time with the Old Testament to see that the God in those texts is the same gracious, loving God Jesus called Abba? Are you short-legged on Christ because you are uncomfortable with the idea of miracles or the Incarnation, or because Jesus' teachings seem too difficult to be practical? Are you short-legged on the Spirit because you love control, hate change, or are too busy to discern her whispers? Whatever your reasons for the imbalance, seek to restore balance to your relationship with our Triune God, and you will discover a fuller and deeper faith. Spend time getting to know each of the persons of the Trinity, and you will discover that we really do worship one God, one who is ever creating and recreating, saving and sanctifying, teaching and transforming, a God of justice, mercy, and steadfast love.

Robert Wilhelm, a professional storyteller from Hagerstown, who died just a couple of weeks ago, once told a story which conveys this which he heard in Greece called "*A Monastery on Mount Athos*, that went something like this:⁶

There once was a small monastery on Mt. Athos which developed a reputation for providing wonderful spiritual guidance to pilgrims. When visitors arrived, they sat in a small courtyard garden until the porter, Old Gregorio greeted them. He sometimes took a while to arrive because he liked to watch the visitors from a high window first to see how patient they were. Once he arrived he asked them lots of questions. "Where were they from? How was their journey? What were they seeking?" Then Gregorio would disappear, and soon one of three monks would pass through a narrow door to greet the visitor.

If it was Father Demetrios, the eldest monk, he would begin to speak at once with a voice that was rich and deep and flowed like honey. The white bearded monk always knew when to stop, for when he did, the pilgrim would open with a torrent of words and pour out his heart and troubles. If it was the black-bearded Father Iohannes, he always sat silently with the visitor, sometimes for a long while. Eventually the visitor would speak and when he did, Father Iohannes would gaze upon him with the love of a brother. His only words were blessings. The last monk, Father Alexis, was a beardless young man. When he came out, he would warmly smile and caress the pilgrim's face with his eyes. His own face mirrored whatever the pilgrim was feeling. Then Father Alexis spoke from the depths of the pilgrim's soul, revealing the yearnings that the pilgrim had carried into the Monastery.

Most guests spent the night. When they left the next day feeling refreshed and restored, they would pass an icon which symbolized the monastery; it was an icon of the Holy Trinity. Whether or not the pilgrims noticed it, Gregorio did. Each morning he would pray near the icon for guidance before deciding which of the three monks to call forth for the pilgrims. The icon portrayed a white-bearded Creator, a black-bearded Redeemer, and a beardless Spirit filled with

⁶ Wilhelm, Robert Bela, "*A Monastery on Mount Athos*," in Secret of the Heart The Complete Cycle C of Parables Today (iBook, Storyfest Productions, 2015).

youth. They were seated around a table, breaking bread, and sharing their life-giving presence with one another.

Now let me be clear that by sharing this old story, I am not trying to imply that the Trinity consists of two bearded men and a boy, instead of a bird. Our God is beyond gender and beyond our understanding. But the story conveys well that all three persons of the Trinity meet different spiritual needs within us in different ways. Seek to know and serve all three, and wherever you are on your journey of faith, you will discover the one God who truly knows what you need most to endure, thrive, and be the person you were made to be. Thanks be to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and always. Amen.