

## One x One x One

*Living God, let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

There is often a fear or hesitancy expressed by preachers in offering a faithful word on Holy Trinity Sunday. This fear is often rooted in the desire to avoid some ancient heresy in their sermon! Yes, the history of the church is rife with ancient heresies, or statements that defy the orthodox belief of the church, when it comes to defining the very nature of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—in this unique relationship of Holy Trinity. Modalism, Arianism, Adoptionism, Apollinarianism, Docetism, Pneumatomachians, Melchisedechians... The list goes on! All of these heresies have divided the church for centuries!

But we would be right to dispense with this fear today, as we hear the familiar words of John's Gospel, and the famous proclamation of John 3:16-17, *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."* In this we see God's hope expressed not in condemnation of the wicked, but in the redemption of all. In this we see God's action through the movement of the Spirit, breathing like a new wind and working for unity with all. Yes, as we the church gather on this Holy Trinity Sunday and seek to wrap our minds around the infinite mystery of our God, we proclaim that the very nature of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is to be found in **Unity**.

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity is our human means of expressing the inexpressible nature of God. It is, in this way, understandable that trying to wrap our head around the Doctrine of Trinity can be a stumbling block to faith. And yet, each year we try. We come, like Nicodemus in the night, still searching to grasp this mystery, and Christ, in his mercy, is speaking still.

As a church, we agree on three confessions that express this Trinitarian relationship: The Apostles Creed, The Nicene Creed, and The Athanasian Creed. While it's very long, I'd like to give the Athanasian Creed its moment in the sun on this day of all days! It provides a helpful definition of the nature of a God who is one in three.

It begins by saying that this is the faith of the church, *"We worship one God in trinity and the Trinity in unity, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the divine being."* And after much repetitive explanation, it concludes, *"And in this Trinity, no one is before or after, greater or less than the other; but all three persons are in themselves, coeternal and coequal; and so we must worship the Trinity in unity and the one God in three persons."*

Simple, right?! Not exactly... Now we see why this is a stumbling block! Even this, a great definition of trinity that is meant to reveal the nature of God in *unity*, can feel, in the end, convoluted. One God in three persons just sounds like a horrible math problem, right? Let's do this math, because I think that's important. What is  $1+1$ ? 2. Correct.  $+1$ ? 3. There we go.  $1+1+1=3$

How can One Father, plus One Son, plus One Holy Spirit possibly allow us to worship ONE GOD? It's easy to get stuck in the math. With this mathematical confusion, we may be quick to feel like Nicodemus, chided by Jesus who says, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?" We confess the Trinity in worship each week, in each baptism, and our whole lives long, yet God who is three and yet one seems an elusive mystery.

Maybe the math is too hard. Maybe God doesn't add up. Maybe we're just supposed to leave it to the mystery of God that we can't comprehend and move on. But let's think for a moment about what we know about God... Jesus says many times that he and the Father are one. We hear in our Gospel Jesus expressing overlapping images of Spirit, Son, and Father. We hear the promises in the waters of holy baptism that we too are made one in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. At this table we have a communion, a oneness, with the saints as we are united with Christ in his Holy Supper.

How can one and one and one be made one? Perhaps our old equation was using the wrong operator. In math, the plus sign and minus sign are operators telling us to add or subtract. Our 1st grade math tells us that  $1+1+1=3$ , but let's jump to second grade math for a moment...

What is  $1 \times 1$ ?

1.

And what is *that*  $1 \times 1$ ?

1.

Perhaps... Trinity in unity, God's very nature, is not adding, but multiplying to the ends of the earth! We confess that we as church are not disparate members, but through the waters of holy baptism we are one in Christ our Lord! What peace that may bring Christ's followers today who obsess and wring their hands over numbers! There would be no cause to look gloomily across a sanctuary and say, we had only 30 here this week when last week there were 50 and ten years ago 100. There is only ever one body gathered to worship the Lord!

This is what we profess when we confess our faith in the Trinity! We profess that we are one body, united in God's very nature of unity. Kept separated from loved ones and church family over the course of a pandemic we have always been one body, united in the bonds of love. We are not adding to our body, but multiplying the body to reflect our unity with our God—Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier!

Consider then when trouble befalls the church. Consider when disagreement creeps among us. We may lament subtracting members from our midst and rolls when tensions arise and bonds are broken. Since the beginning of the church there has been schisms. But has all been lost? No. Let's do some third grade math now! If we are one in Christ (1x1x1), and someone is divided from our number, tell me what 1 divided by 1 equals.

1.

Yes, Church. We will face division. We will face discord and disagreement and feud over interpretation. We will sin and stray and resist. We will walk boldly beyond where others can comfortably go in the cause of justice and we will be divided. We will all one day face death, of our loved ones and of ourselves. And yet we will still be one in Christ.

Are you fighting with a neighbor? You are one in the love of God.

Are you angry with a family member? You are one in the love of God.

Are you filled with hatred for an enemy? You are one in the love of God.

There is both challenge and promise in this truth. The very nature of God is unity, and in creation God sought unity with us. God loved us into being, and the **power** that makes us one, even in the midst of multiplication and division, is LOVE. As Paul writes, *"Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

It was the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who said so eloquently in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail, *"We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."* We are united in love. We are united in hope. We are united in promise. We are united by the very nature of the God who loved us into being, poured out love on the cross, and descended in love on Pentecost.

One x One x One.

Love x Love x Love.

Peace x Peace x Peace.

Hope x Hope x Hope.

Justice x Justice x Justice.

Through each of us who profess our faith in this God who is unity, these things—love, peace, hope, and justice—are multiplying. We will face division, but even division does not change the nature of God. There is and always will be a place for you in the oneness of God. Our God was, is, and ever will be love.

We are sent to share this Good news, and to share God's love for each of us, is to share our love for one another. It is impossible to share the good news of Jesus Christ while hating another person. In the proclamation of God's love, we are united in God's love. In our trust in God, this love multiplies. In our sharing of love, this God multiplies.

Love x Love x Love.

Though we as a church will face division and death, though we will face distance and circumstance keeping us apart, we are eternally one in Christ our Lord. We are united in Love x Love x Love x Hope x Hope x Hope x Creator x Redeemer x Sanctifier x One x One x One.

Amen.