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The comic strip "Kudzu" has the preacher with his wide brimmed hat, black suit, bow tie, and unmanageable hair, say, "People call the creator by many names...Some folks say 'Allah'.. Some say 'Jehovah'...Some say 'Yahweh'." In the last frame of the strip, the preacher points his finger and says, "You say it 'Yahweh' and I'll say it mine." One title the church historically has given the Creator is the Trinity, God in three persons.

Today, the Sunday following the celebration of Pentecost, is known as Trinity Sunday. The church year has been so designed that all the major events in the life of our Lord are celebrated. The year begins with Advent, a time of preparation for the celebration of the Messiah's birth. Then we move through Christmas to Epiphany on January 6 when the wisemen's visit to the babe represents the coming of the Messiah to the gentiles as well. Lent follows Epiphany and is a time to prepare for the crucifixion and resurrection. Eastertide, celebrating the resurrection, continues for seven Sundays to the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples. These seasons which portray major events in Christ's life culminate in Trinity Sunday when we explore a basic doctrine of the Christian faith. We begin with the beginning on this day and consider the nature of this God whom we serve and worship

The difficulty in understanding the nature of God can best be demonstrated by looking at the history of this doctrine. When the early disciples walked with Jesus, they felt they were in the presence of something mysterious. After his resurrection, they no doubt recalled Jesus' words, "I and the Father are one." Then, as they gathered as a community, shared their possessions, studied, prayed together, they discovered a spirit among them that led them to God.

When the church began to grow and infiltrate the Roman Empire, the contact with Greek philosophy and a foreign culture forced the church to translate the Christian beliefs into terms that were intelligible to the people of that day. What Christians believe about God was especially difficult to explain. A major question to answer, and the answering led to serious controversy within the church, was the question, "Who was Jesus?" Some said that Jesus was God. Others said there is more to God than what was seen in Jesus. Some said that Jesus was God and only appeared to be a human being. Others said he was a unique human.

This controversy is still alive in our day and affects our understanding of not only the Christian faith, but as to how we see the world. How we answer the question--Who was Jesus?--affects our world-view. At one extreme of the spectrum today we have the Unitarians who believe that God is a unity, not a trinity. They believe that Jesus was a unique human being, a great teacher. Unitarians seek to apply the teachings of Jesus to their lives and society. At the other end of the spectrum are those who affirm the divinity of Jesus to such an extent that their religion becomes other-worldly. They are much more concerned with the here-after than with the here-now.

The crucial question was and is, "Who was Jesus?" Is the love that was revealed to us on the cross by Jesus the love of God or of someone else? Is the salvation experience which results from believing in Jesus, confessing his name, accepting his gift of grace and eternal life, from God or from someone or something else? If such love is found outside God, if salvation is found outside God, are there two Gods?

The church in those early centuries was convinced that in Jesus they saw God. They were convinced that the salvation which they found in Jesus Christ was of God. Therefore, they concluded that Jesus was both human and divine. In the Apostles' Creed which was formulated by a Church Council in approximately 150 A.D., the humanity of Jesus was affirmed in opposition to those who were called gnostics. A critical word in the Apostles' Creed is the word "born. In opposition to gnostics who believed that Jesus only had the appearance of being a human, but was really divine, the church affirmed that Jesus was born. Jesus was born of a woman. Jesus was a baby who cried, wet his pants, and was breast fed. This was scandalous talk to those who tried to make Jesus so pure, so divine, that he couldn't have anything to do with earthly life. But, the church said, "Yes! Jesus was a human as he was divine."

In the fourth century the church affirmed the divinity of Jesus in the Nicene Creed. Phrases which are quite foreign to our world-view are found in the Nicene Creed: God of God...very God of very God...begotten, not made...being of one substance with the Father. The church said quite forcefully that Jesus was more than a teacher, and that through belief in Christ, we find God, we experience God, we experience salvation which leads to eternal life.

This conclusion about Jesus then led to the formulation of the doctrine of the trinitarian God. We believe God is a trinity, known in three persons as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. What do we mean by the Trinity? As we sang in the opening hymn, "Holy, Holy, Holy", what does "God in three persons" mean? This doctrine has caused considerable confusion in the church, for God is not a person, but spirit.

The confusion lies in the word "person," for it has changed meaning though the centuries. In the fourth century when this doctrine was formulated, the word "person" meant an actor in a play. In dramas of that day, actors wore masks to represent the persons they were imitating or portraying. Our word "role" is what the fourth century meant by "person." The actors were acting roles. Therefore, we know God in three roles. God is in three roles, blessed trinity.

For example, I am a man, but I have different roles and I am known in different roles. I am experienced differently, known differently, in my various roles. Right now, you know me as a preacher. You experience me as a preacher. When you come to me for counseling, you know me as a pastor, and I am different in that role than I am when I am a preacher or a teacher. My boys know me as a father, and none of you will ever know me in that role. Ellie knows me as a husband, and, hopefully, none of you will ever know me in that role. I am a son and have a unique relationship with my mother. I am still the same individual, but I have several roles.

We know, we experience God in different roles, in different ways. We

Now God as the Creator, and through the experiencing of God's creation, we know God. We know God through a majestic scene of nature. Standing in Yosemite Park, we get a feeling of awe in the presence of God. Scientists can have a unique experience of God as they work with the created order.

We also know God as the Son, as the historical person, Jesus, who walked on this earth, whose words and deeds are recorded in the Bible. Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, we are privileged to know God in a unique way, through God's role as the Son.

We also know God as the Holy Spirit. We can feel God's presence in our lives. We can experience comfort, strength, peace, love, a sense of forgiveness, because God is near us now, closer to us than our hands and feet.

C.S. Lewis has given us another approach to understanding God as trinity. C. S. Lewis has said that when you pray, you are attempting to get in touch with God who is outside you, in front of you. God is the object of your prayer. God is the one being addressed. At the same time, all that you know about the God to whom you are praying has been shown to you by Jesus Christ. Christ, in a sense, stands by your side as you pray, prompting you, helping you to pray. At the same time, you realize that the reason you are praying is that you have been motivated by the Spirit who is in you. When you pray you enter into a new existence, you enter the spiritual world. Therefore, God the Trinity, is in front of you, beside you, and in you.

Another interpretation of the Trinitarian God has come to us from St. Augustine, here of the church who dates back to the fourth century. I am especially intrigued with Augustine's explanation. Augustine reminds us that God is love, and love is an action, a verb. To Augustine, the Father is the lover, the Son is the one who is loved, and the Holy Spirit is the love. This image is one of movement. The essence of God is not something static, but is a movement, a process, a dynamic that is so live and concrete it generates its own identity, like a person. When a group of people work, fellowship, dream, fight together, they generate a unique spirit, an identity that is larger than the individuals. School principals will tell you that each class has its own unique spirit. Every church that I have pastored has had its own unique, distinctive spirit. Church shoppers can tell you that each church has a uniqueness and the vibrations of that church are soon experienced by the shopper. Likewise, God as love, God as Trinity, generates a unique, distinctive spirit we call the Holy Spirit and when persons, families and churches are in God, the Holy Spirit is evident.

Now what does all this mean for us today? What difference does it make to your life to know God as Trinity? First, it means that life is dynamic, not static. Science today tells us that matter is not static, but is composed of a mass of moving particles called neutrons, protons, electrons acting on each other, (in threes, like the Trinity!) in tension, in play, in dynamic. Life is ever-changing, not constant, but moving. Life is a process of becoming. Time cannot be stopped; happy, productive be those who are growing, not resisting; who grow with the change, who seek to influence and direct the changes, rather than deny or resist.

Secondly, to know God as Trinity means that a Christian is one who

becomes part of the dynamic we call God. To be a Christian means to receive God's love and to pass it on to neighbor. To be a Christian is to share in the experience we call God, revealed to us through Jesus Christ, who was both human and divine. We share, we participate. In other words, the only way to get wet is to get into the water. One cannot just stand and look at the water and expect to get wet. There is a fountain of energy, a fountain of love, and we must stand in the spray if we are going to get wet.

The church is the arena, the body of Christ, where the fountain is flowing. You are most apt to get wet, to get doused, to get changed by the Holy Spirit, when you are actively involved in the worship, ministry and mission of the church. The church is where we worship the triune God, where we open ourselves to God's Spirit and to each other; where the love, the energy, may flow.

Come, jump in, let go. The God whom we know as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the God in three roles whom we experience as love, will meet you, change you, guide you, now and through eternity.

THREE GODS OR ONE?

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