

Title: The Three Lovers

Let us pray.

From the Right Reverend Tom Wright, Ph.D., “~~Father~~ (God) almighty, maker of heaven and earth: Set up your kingdom in our midst. Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God: Have mercy on me (us), a sinner(s). Holy Spirit, breath of the living God: Renew ~~me~~ (us) and all the world.” Amen.

It’s Trinity Sunday: One God in three persons. The challenge today is to talk about something nobody fully understands and keep the listeners awake.

I do want to tell you a brief story. A man in a certain parish was only seen in church one Sunday a year and it wasn’t Easter. It was Trinity Sunday. One person had restrained his curiosity year after year. He could not contain it any more. He approached the man and said, “I have noticed that you have selected this particular time for your only visit to church.” “Oh, that’s easy to explain,” the man said. “I like to come on this day so I can hear the preacher get all tangled up trying to explain the Trinity!”

St. Augustine came to a similar conclusion in the fourth century, after writing 800 pages on the Trinity. He declared that he did not understand it.

This is St. Augustine’s story. As he walked along the seashore one day, he saw a small boy playing with a seashell. The boy scooped a hole in the sand, filled his shell with water and poured it into the hole. The great theologian asked the boy, “What are you doing, my son?” The youngster replied, “I am going to pour the sea into that hole.” Then Augustine said to himself, “That is what I have been trying to do. Standing at the ocean of infinity, I have attempted to grasp it with my finite mind.”

There are times when it seems so natural to ask, “why” in an effort to explore the deeper resources of our inner selves. When I watch the Memorial Day parades and observances, celebrating those who gave their lives for our freedom, I can’t help asking, why? Why can’t we find a solution for war?

The late Cardinal Cushing tells of an occasion when he was administering last rites to a man who had collapsed in a general store. Following his usual custom, he knelt by the man and asked, “Do you believe in God the Father,

God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit?” The Cardinal said the man roused a little bit, opened an eye, looked at him and said, “Here I am, dying, and you ask me a riddle?”

The lectionary sticks me with three texts to try to explain the mystery of the Trinity. This year, I was challenged to pick one that really addressed the Trinity. I picked Romans and the Holy Spirit assisted me.

First, a note about what I observe as the psychology of St. Paul. I am not a trained psychologist, but I can make some inferences from observation. For Paul’s letter to the Romans, Paul makes distinctions between the spirit and the flesh. Paul believes, as I do, that our bodies house our spirits.

However, Paul does not see the spirit and the flesh as complimentary. Paul sees them as adversaries. Paul has a self-loathing of his body. Paul did say that he wishes he were with Jesus and be rid of his physical body. Suicide was likely anathema to him and he had work to do in bringing people to Christ, which kept him alive. In our section from Romans, we hear Paul’s duality and contempt for the flesh.

Paul exhorts his hearers to not live by the flesh, by a physical body. Instead, we are to live by the Spirit and so be free from the flesh, which dies. Living by the Spirit brings life. By this, Paul is inferring that eternal life is through the Spirit, because our physical bodies do die.

Those who are led by the Holy Spirit become children of God. What he means is that by being children of God, we are heirs with Christ. It is not just that Jesus is the son of God, but through the incarnation, we are children of God. We are daughters and sons of God. We will stand before God as Jesus stands before God – however that works. I don’t know.

Paul identifies two spirits: one of slavery and one of adoption. I’m not sure what Paul is referencing here. It could be that Paul is connecting what we call an Old Testament God with a god of slavery. That God made laws and rules that if broken provoked fear. In essence, Judaism represented, ironically, slavery to the Law of Moses by a people delivered from slavery by Moses.

If we receive the Holy Spirit at baptism, we are adopted by God. The Certificate of Adoption is held by the Holy Spirit on our behalf. That is how we become children of God. Being adopted, we are bound to the loving parent, God.

Whenever we cry to God, the cry is provoked by the Spirit within us. It is the Holy Spirit somehow co-existing with and within our spirit that provokes our cry and our prayer. Our own internal spirit, the thing that makes us who we are, gets attached to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit that is infused with our spirit that makes us adoptees of God.

Since we are adopted by God, we are heirs with Christ. The glory we will one day receive, is the same glory Jesus already has. All the sufferings that beset us in this life will be redeemed in the glory we will one day share with Christ.

Well, somebody or somebodies who I assume were smart decided that this Romans passage was appropriate for Trinity Sunday. I believe this is because Paul mentions all three persons of the Trinity in describing our salvation. The key part of this is that we become intimately involved with the Trinity.

Though highly abstract, we can only be adopted by God through the actions of the Trinity. It takes the Holy Spirit to be indwelling within us, following Christ, becoming heirs with Christ, and receiving the glory of God.

Perhaps, this is why the Trinity is so important. Paul makes it less a topic and muse of theologians, but an existential concern for every one of us. Without the Trinity, we are not accepted by God, three beings of one substance.

Why do we repeat creeds that seem to make no difference in how we follow Jesus or living a life where we love our neighbor as ourselves? We repeat creeds to affirm that the Jesus story is historically true;
that there is only one God;
that all existence is only possible by and through God;
that God saved us from our sins through Jesus;
that there is a life that is beyond this one;

that the Holy Spirit is with us and the church, driving us forward to a new life.

All of this requires the Holy Trinity.

Jews dance around this issue while trying to maintain the sanctity of there being one God. Jewish scripture mentions a Spirit but they seem to imply that the Spirit is something more than an angel and not part of God. Jewish wisdom literature is big on the personification of Wisdom. Wisdom is feminine. Wisdom is divine-like, but not quite God. Wisdom is certainly from God. Judaism cannot conceive of God taking human form. And they do not even see the need for it.

I firmly believe that our brains are way too small to comprehend God. Our best guess, so far, is the Trinity. Jesus' presence as a human being, forced us to think of God differently. Without Jesus, we would not have conceived the concept of the Trinity. For all I know, God has other aspects beyond the Trinity. But it is the Trinity that God has, so far, revealed to us. Or, it is possible that that is all we have perceived.

We are created in the image and likeness of God. That does not mean God looks like Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling image. It means, more or less, that we are the only creatures on earth having the capacity to understand nature and the capacity to return God's love. Jesus' commandment to "love one another as I have loved you" becomes possible by the Holy Spirit driving us to love others.

The glue to all of this is love. We have the God-given gift of conceiving God as love and returning that love. That being a model, we are to reflect God's love to all those around us. This system of love is made possible through the work of the Holy Trinity. Simplifying the creeds into three words, God is love.

Text: **Romans 8:12–17** (NRSV)

¹² So then, brothers and sisters,¹ we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—¹³ for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵ For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into

¹ Gk *brothers*#

fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba!^m Father!”¹⁶ it is that very Spirit bearing witnessⁿ with our spirit that we are children of God,¹⁷ and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.¹

^m Aramaic for *Father*

ⁿ Or ¹⁵ *a spirit of adoption, by which we cry, “Abba! Father!”* ¹⁶ *The Spirit itself bears witness*

¹ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](#). (1989). (Ro 8:12–17). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.