

1+1+1=1 to the Higher Power

Trinity Sunday

Text: John 1:1,14,18; John 14:9; II Cor. 3:18

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

As the early Jesus movement moved into the early Catholic Church stage, the experience of Jesus moved out of the context of Israel geographically, but also spiritually, into an alien culture as far as Israel was concerned. It moved into a world dominated by Imperial Rome and marked by Greek culture, Greek thinking, Greek language, Greek philosophical ideas. And so, it was the task of those who were sent out by Jesus Christ to tell their experience, what they had experienced in him, in quite another context, quite another religious, cultural context, and that is always a difficult thing. To translate an experience is difficult, even when you are talking to those in your own language and your own environment. But, now to try to tell someone of a transforming experience in a totally different context to those who have had no share in your background, your spiritually traditioning - that, indeed, was a major task, and that was the task of that early Jesus movement.

It was a movement Jewish to the core. The disciples were those who had been nurtured on the central tenet of the creed of Israel, "Hear, o Israel, the Lord our God is one." And now they had experienced in a transforming way that God, in their encounter with Jesus, a human, historical figure with whom they had walked and talked and shared the table of fellowship. In that human, historical figure they had encountered the God of Israel, the God of Moses, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

When they met God in Jesus, they didn't meet some other God. They didn't stop to say, "I wonder about my Judaism. I wonder now if I have to become something other." No, they were fully cognizant of that experience of Jesus being the experience of God, the only God they ever knew, they ever worshiped. The task was how to give expression to that, how to translate that into another context so that it could be understood. In order to do that, we always have to find some common meeting ground; we have to find something in common so that those to whom we are bringing a message or translating an experience can relate to it through some shared knowledge or experience. The Greek civilization, the

ancient world, those to whom they went were not irreligious. They were religious. There were Oriental, mystical religions, there was all the Greek mythology, there was certainly a religious context from which to try to find that which might help communicate their experience. Secondly, there was the whole Greek philosophical tradition. Philosophy was born of the Greeks centuries before. Someone has said all of Western civilization is a series of footnotes to Greek philosophy. So that Greek philosophy conceptually provided the intellectual, rational tools by which they attempted to translate that God experience.

But, in the beginning, of course, it was the experience and they stammered and stuttered and tried to give expression to that which had transformed their lives, and we have the raw material of the eventual church dogma in the New Testament. The church dogma says, according to the title of this message, "1 + 1 + 1=1." (One of my dear friends said to me yesterday, "You restructured religion; now are you starting on math?") "1 + 1 + 1=1" because these were Jewish people and they could not begin to conceive of God other than one, but they had experienced God in Jesus, a human, historical figure, and once they had experienced God in Jesus, Jesus crucified was alive with them still, a powerful presence still with them in the Spirit. We find this in the documents of the New Testament.

Paul was the earliest one to write. I love Second Corinthians 4:6. It has been a text for us. "We've seen the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." That's how Paul said it. In the third chapter of that letter, he was defending his apostleship and he was saying, "Do you think I need letters of recommendation? I don't need letters of recommendation; you are my letters of recommendation; your transformed lives validate my gospel." And then he goes into a paragraph with Moses and the veil of Moses' face. I'm not going to get into all that, but he comes down to the end of the chapter and says, "But we, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the Lord, are transformed by degrees into his likeness by the Spirit." The last paragraph of the third chapter says, "The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is..." One might ask, "Does Lord refer to God? Or does Lord refer here to Jesus?" and one might find different commentators coming up with different answers. Those are a very confusing few statements because Paul is confused, because this great monotheist of the God of Israel is talking about God in a human face, and how does one do that? He says somehow or other by the Spirit in that face the glory of the Lord was shining, and then he talks about that face as the Lord, and he says, "As we gaze on that face, we become like that face, shaped like that one who was the shape of the heart of God," and he says all of this is through the Spirit of God. And so, Paul is trying to give expression to that experience that he had. He never encountered the historical Jesus, we don't believe, but he did have that visionary, mystical experience and this great champion of the God of Israel became the apostle of Jesus Christ as the incarnation of the God of Israel.

This is what John says, as well. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, the Word was God." I like to translate that, "In the beginning was the intention, God's intention. In the beginning was the intention of God and in the fullness of time, the intention became flesh and dwelled among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten Son of God." No one has ever seen God, but the Son has revealed God and, as John was telling the story of Jesus decades later, Jesus has that discussion with the disciples. Jesus is going to leave them. They know the way and all that, and finally Phillip says to him, "Just show us the Father and we'll stop bugging you," and he says, "Oh, really, Phillip? Have I been with you so long and you still don't get it? If you've seen me, you've seen the Father."

Did Jesus say that? I doubt it. I don't think so. Wouldn't that be a bit off-putting, Jesus going around ringing a bell saying, "Here comes God. Just look at me, here comes God." That doesn't feel right to me. I think what we have in the Gospel of John is precisely the experience of finding God in Jesus. This is faith's affirmation. Jesus simply was that authentic human incarnation of the living God, and those who encountered God in Jesus tried every which way to bring to expression that which they had experienced, that which was the deep conviction of their lives, that Jesus was the intention of God in human flesh so that in order to communicate that, John has this beautiful discussion with the disciples in which Jesus says, "If you've seen me, you've seen the Father," which is the same thing that Paul was saying, "We've seen the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

The New Testament is not a systematic document. Paul was not a systematic theologian, but all of that raw "stuff" eventually got gathered up because the Jesus movement, which was a Jewish movement, had to somehow or other come to understand its own experience. The God of Israel now, these monotheists had to reckon with, had been enfleshed in a human, historical figure who was crucified and yet present and powerful with them still so that they broke bread and remembered him and experienced him and went out to do his work in the same powerful fashion as when he was in the flesh. How do you figure?

Well, eventually, of course, they had to give some account of that. Now, if they had been in India and Jesus had been an Indian and they had been Hindus, they wouldn't have had a problem. Cast the mold for another little image and put it on the shelf, because Hinduism is polytheistic and it believes in numerous historical manifestations of the Divine Mystery. That doesn't work for a Jew, because you can have not only no representation of God, but there is only one true God, Creator of all. But, to touch Jesus was to touch God! To look into Jesus' face was to see into the heart of God! How could it be? So, Jesus is God? But, Jesus is human. That was the problem of the nature of Christ; it consumed a couple of centuries. And if Jesus is God, and God is God, and the Spirit of God makes Jesus present now, now you have $1 + 1 + 1 = 1$. How do you figure?

We could ridicule the doctrine of the Trinity because that is what this eventually became, the dogma or the doctrine of the Trinity. We can ridicule it; we can be confused by it; we can be frustrated by it, but we have to know that some of the most brilliant minds, some of the most serious persons in that ancient world wrestled with this experience which they tried to translate into Greek conceptuality, and they knew they were up against a real problem. Augustine wrote a treatise on the Trinity and after it was over, he said, "We say these things not because we would say these things, but because we wouldn't be silent," trying to give some kind of word to experience. Eventually the Church formulated this doctrine of God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, one God blest forever. $1 + 1 + 1 = 1$. You see, it's not a problem as long as you are in the heat of the experience, the white heat of the experience of God, because the experience is enough to say I can't make logical sense of it, but I know. Then, once the experience gets translated into a formula and it becomes a dogma and then the dogma is used to catechize the next generation and the next generation, now we have a problem because there is no longer that white heat experience. Now it becomes an intellectual conundrum; it becomes a puzzle, and now you have creedal authority and a Church institution enforcing a creedal statement with those who may or may not have had the experience of God. Then you have orthodoxy which can be very, very killing if it lacks the experience.

This sermon was born one day when an old veteran of the A.A. movement said to me, grouching about ministers and churches, which is his custom, and I suppose finding a sympathetic ear in me, he said, "I wish I could take all the community pastors down to an A.A. meeting and make them sit there and listen to people who really talk about God!" And I have had enough experience with the A.A. community in the past to feel that would be a very good move. So, I went back and went through some of the A.A. material again. I found reference to Ernest Kurtz who was here a few years ago. Ernest Kurtz wrote the definitive history of the A.A. movement, entitled *Not God*. This is what the human being has to learn - Not God. I am not God. But, God is. That is, there is a Higher Power, and the AA. movement, in its steps, gives one the freedom to understand God in one's own way, not worried about dotting the I's or crossing the T's, but recognizing that God is, coming to an awareness that I am not my own, I have not created this whole phenomenon we call the world, I have not created my own life. All is gift, all is given, I am given and I am a part of that which is given, and there is a mystery that is beyond and beneath and above all that is.

And in the A.A. movement, just call it the Higher Power. Call it anything you want to call it. Visualize it any way you want to visualize it. Use any kind of an image that will work. But it is the movement from I am not God to God is, and as the veterans of the A.A. movement say, if one can take that step, in other words, if one can come to an awareness that God is, that Ultimate Mystery of all things, and if one can trust that power to be gracious in the transformation of the human person, then one is on the way to health and healing. Then the doctrine of God may become refined. Then someday someone along that path may discover the

face of Jesus, and in the face of Jesus, may see into the heart of God and all of its wonder and all of its beauty, because Jesus is the face that gives form to the Mystery. And then one may feel some tingle in one's pinkie, and that would be because there is a connection, because it is not the ancient One, period, but the ancient One who is present in the Spirit. After all, that's all that Trinity Sunday is trying to say - that God is, and that God is for us, that God is focused in the face of that gracious one full of mercy and available to us through the Spirit of God or the Spirit of Christ or the Holy Spirit, or whatever you want to call it, because, you see, finally God is not about giving us a theological exam, and coming to worship is not about a rational discussion of the conceptual framework of the ontological Trinity, thank you very much.

We come here in our deep grief and brokenness and our great joy and celebration, when the diagnosis is cancer, when the last week has left us bereft of our most beloved, when we launch our youth, bundle our babies, and experience the deepest dimensions of human experience. It is then that God is that which gives us hope, that is what sustains us and keeps us, that infinite and inexhaustible ground of our being, that overshadowing presence, because you see, it's $1 + 1 + 1 = 1$ to the Higher Power. Image it as you will, but I suggest you'll go a long time before you'll find a more beautiful image than that etched in the face of Jesus, and we, beholding as in a mirror that image, we with unveiled face beholding that image, miracle of miracles, are shaped into that image. We begin to take on the likeness. And so, you know, the historical Jesus is no more, but the Spirit who is affecting that transformation is yet still, and though I cannot see his face, I can see *your* face, and in your face, I see his face which is the picture of the heart of God, God, who is good. That's all Trinity is all about - $1 + 1 + 1 = 1$ to the Higher Power.