

The Trinity: the Heart Has Reasons

Trinity Sunday

John 1:1-5, 18; 14:1-20; I John 4:7-8, 12 & 16

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Over so many years we as a worshipping community – Christ Community in Spring Lake – traversed the Christian liturgical calendar. It became more and more meaningful to me – more significant than the secular calendar January to December. Over and over again, the same feasts and festivals, but always evolving with deeper insight and evolving nuance. And every cycle ends where we are today – Trinity Sunday – the Sunday following Pentecost – reflecting, it seems to me, ancient insight and wisdom, for the story of Jesus is, for the Christian church, the story through which we learn of God, the Sacred Mystery, the source, ground and goal of the whole cosmic drama of which we know more and more, yet whose mystery and infinity only deepen with each new breakthrough in understanding.

I selected this Sunday to be here because that would ensure that I would focus once again on the deepest mystery, the most meaningful questions of our human existence. I am one of those strange creatures that continues to wonder about the God Question, the classic philosophical question, *Why is there something rather than nothing?*– questions about our whence and our whither and the meaning of human existence in the meantime. And, while I do it deliberately and consciously, I suspect to be human is now and again to wonder about the ultimate issues of our human situation.

When I had decided to take up the God Question one more time, I came on an online announcement of a class that promised to give a “faith lift” by exploring “the difficult idea of God in light-hearted and easy to grasp ways.” Well, I didn’t sign up! While light hearted is fine, I’m not sure we can talk about God in “easy to grasp ways.” I do hope, however, that as our human story unfolds we can catch a glimpse here and there, now and again, of the Sacred Mystery that embraces us. So we begin.

But before I deal with the meaning of the Trinity in the Christian tradition I want to reflect with you on the danger of dogma. Dogma is such a familiar term in religious parlance that I can probably take for granted that everyone knows the meaning of the term. Yet precisely such familiarity sometimes misses a term's nuance and depth. I went to the dictionary. *Dogma* comes from the Greek – “that which one thinks true, an opinion, decree, from *dokein*, to think, seem.”

Meanings listed:

1. a doctrine; tenet; belief (also collectively);
2. a positive, arrogant assertion of opinion; dogmatic utterance;
3. in theology, a doctrine or body of doctrines formally and authoritatively affirmed.

Under “dogmatic” – “asserted *a priori* or without proof; asserting opinion in a positive or arrogant manner.”

Checking the synonyms sheds light on the danger of dogma: “imperious, dictatorial, authoritative, arrogant, magisterial, self-opinionated, positive.”

One would hardly feel good having such descriptive terms applied to oneself and I suspect the bad name religion has acquired over centuries and generations is because religions of various traditions and expressions have been seen and experienced to be marked by dogma, experienced as dogmatic, imperious, dictatorial, arrogant and self-opinionated.

If dogma is used to describe a religious tradition's teaching, the word is legitimate – all religious traditions and groups have teachings, tenets, beliefs. But is it not interesting how teaching, belief, opinion slide into dogmatism, into arrogance of opinion without possibility of verification. One meaning of dogma not often understood or admitted is “opinion.” The dictionary defines dogmatic as “asserted *a priori*” and that points out there is no proof to be offered; in a word, being dogmatic is to assert an opinion unfounded in any verification.

There is nothing startlingly new here; however, I have become especially aware of late of the lack of awareness of the nature of religious belief. For example, a current discussion – a noted leader in the fundamentalist wing of Christianity was asked if he thought Romney could win over the conservative evangelical voters. His response was that he thought Romney would run into trouble because his Mormon faith was wrong on the deity of Jesus Christ and therefore wrong on the Trinity. Without the deity of Jesus there is no second member of the Godhead and Trinitarian dogma has been the centerpiece of the Christian tradition.

Since I was dealing with the Trinity today, my ears perked up and I smiled to myself. This is precisely my point. The evangelical Christian is certain Christianity is the true religion and Christianity rests on the Triune God. There was not a hint of a recognition that the Trinity is a dogma – a belief authoritatively declared as true with no proof possible – it is an opinion, an *a priori* assertion.

Obviously I bring this up simply as an illustration of what happens everywhere all the time, by almost everyone. This is the case at least until I begin to see that the Christian creed and my particular tribe within the Christian Church has confessional statements that are not grounded in rational proof and capable of verification, but are beliefs, opinions, authoritatively affirmed.

I have had my encounter with the dogmatic claims of the Christian Church. I was reminded of that recently in a conversation with a family member. Chase Bank and Jamie Dimon were in the news and I suggested the fiasco at Chase might help put in place some banking regulations like the Volcker Rule. Not agreeing with me, my loved one reminded me that at one time I left the institutional church chafing under its “regulations.” But I corrected him: it was not my choice to leave; I was put out because where my faith vision was growing I was calling in question rather central beliefs of the church’s dogmatic structure. Every institution needs structure and creeds and confessions have their place. The problem arises when they are viewed as sacred dogmatic structures that disallow fresh insight and growing knowledge.

I was reminded of a Sunday morning, I think in 1995 or 1996. I preached at Fountain Street Church and did a follow-up discussion in their chapel. It was jammed, standing room only. In response to a question I remember as if it were yesterday, I said for most of my life and my ministry I had been ignorant and arrogant and the marriage of ignorance and arrogance is dangerous and destructive. Fountain Street Church had a great number of refugees from conservative Grand Rapids churches and with the expression of ignorance wedded to arrogance there was an audible umm across the chapel.

The danger of dogma – not that it is not legitimate for a community, a confessional group, a religious tradition to have confessional statements, creeds that reflect what the group believes. The problem comes when such dogma becomes a straitjacket, cutting off ongoing thinking, research and new knowledge available from the respective disciplines of inquiry as well as further meditation on the religious claims of a group, local or global.

Perhaps I’m belaboring this point but in today’s cultural and social environment there is such a need of epistemological humility. Epistemology is the theory of how we know what we claim to know. And in the dogmatism that marks so much religious conversation (or is it confrontation), there is so much absolutism on issues that have no proof or disproof by means of reason, of critical thinking.

I mentioned above that I was asked to leave the Reformed Church unless I denied my emerging vision of Christian faith, but in the news recently was the story of a congregation that left the Reformed Church of America and left their two million plus dollar building because the RCA was becoming lax and liberal on the matter

of homosexuality – being too open to gay/lesbian persons – contrary to the “Word of God.”

Again, I point to a specific instance, not to discuss or debate it, but, as in the case of Romney and the deity of Christ, to illustrate how society, religious and other groups can be divided and set over against each other by dogmatic claims that are without warrant of critical, rational thought.

And perhaps that is precisely where the problem lies:

The Delusion of Dogma

Put simply, the delusion of dogma is that dogma is founded on reason and thus can be declared as true based on reason and demonstrated as true by means of rational analysis and proof. Of course, this is precisely what the dictionary tells us about dogma as we have seen above. It is opinion, belief, *a priori* assertion – not the consequence of rational analysis. Yet that is how statements of faith, doctrinal position, or belief about, for example, human sexuality are treated.

The religious institutions in all their various forms and configurations have claimed to have “the truth,” and not just “their truth” but *the* truth. Consequently we have all the competing truth claims across the spectrum of religious groups from right to left on the spectrum of opinion.

If religious belief, religious conviction, is not based on reason, what is it based on? After all, none of us wants to be a babbling fool claiming as true what a reasonably balanced human being would write off as ridiculous. Let me suggest that dogma arises out of experience.

The Source of Dogma

This is Trinity Sunday as I said when I began and it has taken me a long time to come back to it, having acknowledged dogma’s danger and its delusion. The danger – the absolutist claims for dogmatic formulations which cause division in the human family and in the extreme instances ignite war and terror. The delusion – that dogma is rooted in reason, capable of rational proof. That is a gloomy picture I have painted thus far. However, if we understand how dogma arises we can come to appreciate its place in our lives, individually and in community. Using the dogma of the Trinity, it is my intention to show dogma’s source in experience.

The Trinity is, I suggest, the ultimate expression of the mystery of God or ultimate endeavor to bring to expression the Sacred Mystery. And the early followers of Jesus did not sit around a conference table and brainstorm how they could best confuse future followers of the Way. Much rather, they tried to make sense out of their experience.

Remember these were faithful Jews for whom God was one. Strict monotheism marked Israel. But then they met Jesus and in the brief span of his ministry they experienced humanity in him in another way. Following his death they stayed together and they had experiences of his presence with them – his spirit – such that they believed him alive. A week ago the Church celebrated Pentecost. We speak of it as the birthday of the Church – the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. And they felt empowered to live and to preach the Way of Jesus.

The Gospels were written decades later. It is not as though on Pentecost everything became crystal clear. The community remained together. With the vision of the risen Christ Paul experienced, the mission to the Gentiles emerged. In the great cities of the Empire gatherings of followers of Jesus lived in expectation of a return of Jesus in glory to bring to consummation the reign of God. But decades passed and the King did not appear.

In Ephesus a community gathered around the Apostle John. From that Johannine Circle has come the Fourth Gospel and the three Epistles of John. I am painting this picture because, in the Johannine writings, I think we are given a picture of the early followers of Jesus, followers of the Way who tried to come to an understanding of their experience. The dogma or teaching of the Trinity was a gradual development over those first decades and even centuries as the Jesus Movement tried to articulate what they experienced in their meeting Jesus and what that meant for their understanding of God.

The Fourth Gospel is considered the most theologically reflective of the Gospels, the other three grouped as synoptic in that they, with differences, nonetheless read more like biographical story telling. In John we have a community near the end of the first century reflecting on what the “Christ Event” signified. Particularly in the Gospel and the Epistles we have the raw material that entered eventually into Trinitarian deliberation.

For example: *John 1:1*. “In the beginning was the *logos* (Word)”, bringing our minds back to the creation story – *Genesis 1:1*. And *John 1:14* – The *Logos* (Word) became flesh – the Incarnation – the event we celebrate at Christmas. And interestingly, in the 18th verse – no one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son...who has made him known.”

The intention of this Gospel is clear: to tell the story of Jesus as the revealer of God, as one with God in Creation, as one who became human, as the one who revealed the God no one has ever seen.

All of that is in the first 18 verses – the Prologue. Let me move to just one more passage, one of my favorites, *John 14: 1-20*. We have here Jesus speaking and also a conversation with Thomas and then with Philip. I may be wrong but I see these conversations as created by the writer decades later. Certainly, in an oral

culture stories and sayings were memorized and passed on; that is possible. However it seems more likely to me that such conversations as recorded in *John 14* were created to move the story along effecting the writer's purpose to reveal the way in which Jesus in human flesh was the clue to the eternal, invisible God.

In this context Jesus says he will be leaving them and they cannot follow at this time – but don't be troubled – trust. Then he says he is going on before them to a place they know. But Thomas doesn't know: "...we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Then follows the familiar words that have caused so much Christian exclusivism: "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Now the writer's purpose is further clarified. Jesus says, "If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know Him and have seen Him." Well, that sets up another instance where a disciple asks the question we would have wanted to ask. Philip says, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied."

Obviously, to my mind, that is a set-up question to let Jesus make this amazing claim:

Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me?
Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father?'

Then follows, at least for me, words difficult to understand. The claim is clear but the whole idea of mystical union, mutual indwelling – I admit I find difficult to figure out:

Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?

Jesus continues, claiming his words and works are the words and works of the Father.

As I indicated above I don't see these interchanges as verbatim records of conversations in the days of Jesus' brief ministry. It is far more illuminating for me to picture that early Christian community near the end of the first century trying to figure out what had encountered the disciples and those present in the days of his flesh.

The Word became flesh –
No one has seen God.
The enfleshed Word makes God known.
Show us the Way.
I am the Way.
Show us the Father.

If you have seen me you have seen the Father.

And then skipping down a few verses:

I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Advocate
to be with you forever. This is the Spirit...

Now from this same early Christian community we have the three letters of John – not necessarily from the writer of the Fourth Gospel but from the same circle. Put these claims from *I John* together with the above. The First Letter opens:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard,
what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched
with our hands, concerning the word of life.

Concrete encounters to say the least.

In the fourth chapter we have the familiar declaration “God is love.” Connecting to the Gospel *John 1:18*, the words are repeated:

No one has ever seen God.

And then a fascinating change from the Gospel. That early community living far from Jerusalem and the days of Jesus’ flesh are not directed to Jesus as the place of revelation but rather to each other.

No one has ever seen God. If we love one another, God lives in us and His love is perfected in us.

And then there is a mention of the Spirit.

By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit.

Once again it is repeated –

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

I have overloaded you with Scripture but I do so with purpose – to ground my claim that the source of dogma is experience. In the wake of Jesus’ life, death and sensed continuing presence in the community through the Holy Spirit, those who encountered him and those who were drawn into the ongoing and growing community tried to understand what they had experienced. That is how I read the Fourth Gospel and the First Letter of John. Telling the story to be sure. Telling the story so a widening circle would believe and find life in Jesus – in the

community of Jesus' followers. From the beginning there was community, there were Eucharistic meals, baptisms and gatherings to praise God. Prayers, sacraments, symbols, no doubt growing liturgy – the community gathered, remembered, prayed and praised.

And, quite naturally I suspect, they tried to understand their experience. The first five centuries saw intensive action, mostly centering in the nature of Jesus. It was a pitched battle at times – excommunications and intense struggle and, of course, once orthodoxy – that is, right opinion/teaching – was achieved, the church had a full-blown philosophical/theological formulation that was far removed from experience.

My point is that experience came first. There would have been no arcane philosophical documents and creedal formulas had not something happened in history that transformed persons and created community. However, once the Church, using Greek philosophical formulas, defined theologically the deity of Jesus, and of the Spirit and their inclusion in the Godhead, orthodoxy was established and thus “right belief.”

That brings us back to where we began. Now dogma became dangerous because it could be used coercively to shut down further reflection on experience as new knowledge emerged. Further, the orthodox church lived under the delusion that God was defined and understood, all the while still speaking of Mystery.

Thank God, once defined, the dogma of the Trinity did not preclude experience, and with religious practice – liturgy, prayers, music, sacramental observance – God still was alive in the lives of God's people.

I have used the dogma of the Trinity on this Trinity Sunday to show the danger and delusion of dogmatic creedal propositions that shut down fresh apprehension of the Mystery of Being.

In his *In Face of Mystery*, Gordon Kaufman tells the story of the evolving, ever emerging cosmic drama, including the emergence and evolution of the human. As he paints the drama of the cosmos evolving and the emergence of the human, he recognizes that we are really the first humans who have the privilege of the backward glance of 13.7 billion years from the Big Bang. In light of all we know at this point of the Big Bang, the expanding universe, Einstein's Theory of Relativity, the interchangeability of matter and energy and all that is far beyond my capacity to understand or convey, Kaufman, in the next to the last section, Part IV, concludes the section with a chapter entitled, “A Trinitarian God.” In the course of this discussion, Kaufman explains:

In this interpretation of Christian faith, the symbol “God” is intended to designate (a) the ultimate reality (mystery) with which we humans have to do, a reality regarded as the creativity which is at work in and through all

things (first motif); that which (b) is thus present and with all realities of our world – all that we can experience, know, or imagine – as that which enables them to be real, their very “reality” so to speak (third motif); and which c) is at work, therefore, within the evolutionary-historical trajectory which has produced our humanness and is moving us toward a more profound humaneness, a trajectory manifest in and paradigmatically identifiable by the Christ-event (second motif). (p. 423)

After a marvelous portrayal of the cosmic drama of which we are a part, a theologian concludes with a Trinitarian scheme – a conception he assures us is not the Trinity of St. Augustine, for example:

By ‘God’ then, Christian faith and Christian theology (in the interpretation presented here) are far from meaning some mythic being ‘up in heaven’ ruling the world from on high, a being who one day sent ‘his’ son to earth to appease the wrath of the father and thus save humans from everlasting torment. (The early formulations of Trinitarian doctrine already ruled out that sort of mythology as heretical.) In this articulation of the Trinitarian idea, I have attempted to overcome the reifying effects of the traditional Trinitarian metaphors (‘substance,’ ‘persons,’ et cetera), thus freeing us to see ‘trinity’ as a concept that specifies the central motifs of the Christian understanding of God while simultaneously holding them together in indissoluble unity... ^a p. 422)

Let me try to express Kaufman’s profound representation of the Trinity – the Sacred Mystery or Source; the Spirit enlivening every atom, molecule, human being, indeed every aspect of cosmic reality; and, the Word enfleshed as the clue to the nature of the Sacred Mystery of Being.

We speak of God because God reveals God’s self in our human flesh; indeed, God identifies with our humanity. We see, we hear, we touch the Word made flesh. God is mirrored in a human face. That is the Christian claim. Something can be known of the nature and character of the ultimate Mystery of God because it has come to expression in the human.

The Christian idea of the Trinity goes one step further; it claims that that ultimate Mystery whose nature and character are expressed in a human life is really the life of all that is – that the whole of reality is in-spirited with God. Nothing exists without the life, the breath of God which animates all that is.

All of that is not so difficult; in fact, it is quite obvious. The Ultimate Mystery-God must hold all things in being, must be pervasively present in all things, the source, the energy, the creative center, moving the whole along the emerging, the unfolding of the bio-historical evolutionary process. Thus God’s Spirit – the wind, the breath that is enlivening – is pervasive. And the Ultimate Mystery, if it would be known, must show itself, communicate its nature and intention. Thus, the

intention or idea of the Mystery “lands,” so to speak, in history, takes on flesh, shows itself. And so it is the claim of the Christian revelation that the character and nature and intention of God can be read off the face of Jesus Christ – flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone.

That is what the Christian religion – that is, Christian theology or doctrine or dogma– claims. It is an attempt to articulate the experience that grounded and founded the Christian movement. We are thinking animals; we want to understand our experience and so we reflect and we do our best to put experience in word and concepts. Those words and concepts are not the experience; they are a step or more removed from the experience. To understand the doctrine of the Trinity is not the same as having the experience of God. Yet, the concept arises out of experience.

As fascinating, profound, even moving as the Trinity is in reflection on its meaning, it is not knowledge, not theological acumen that brings us the depth of experience of the Sacred Mystery that is the source, ground and goal of all that is. Finally it is experience, and experience is the result of practice – devotion, worship with liturgy, sacrament and song – in community that forms us and brings us to trust, to rest, to experience the presence of the Sacred Mystery we call God.

I received a call from an old friend about ten days ago – old as in a long-time friendship and old as in being even a couple years older than I am. His email name is “Dutch Marine.” That gives you a hint about him – very Dutch and very much a Marine. He moved from Spring Lake a few years ago to the north country but he keeps in touch. Every so often he calls, usually asking how it is with my soul and how I am with Jesus. And then also, “How’s your weight?”!

He usually reports on the small local churches in his small village – Methodist, Baptist, whatever. After our usual conversation, he said the previous Sunday he had attended the local Methodist church because they were having a hymn sing. He said, “We sang all the old hymns. I loved it!” But then, he said, two old men got up and sang a duet, “The Old Rugged Cross.” He told me how they sang with such deep emotion, obviously moved by the old hymn and, in their singing, deeply moved my friend. He said to me,

I thought of you and I thought, ‘Richard, I know the theology is wrong but that didn’t matter – Those old men believed it and they loved that hymn and I loved it too! It brought tears to my eyes. Wrong theology, I know, but powerful and I loved it!’

After years of preaching and teaching, of shaping and forming a community, an old friend says, “Richard, I know the theology is wrong but it moved me!” And in all honesty I could say, “Good, I understand. The theology is not important.”

Could you believe I said that? The theology is not important! Well, I did and I meant it in that context. An old hymn from a person's childhood and youth, even into middle age – a beloved hymn, familiar words and tune – I suspect many of you could sing it right here and now –

On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross,
The emblem of suffering and shame;
And I love that old cross where the dearest and best
For a world of lost sinners was slain.

Refrain:

*So I'll cherish the old rugged cross,
Till my trophies at last I lay down;
I will cling to the old rugged cross,
And exchange it some day for a crown.*

O that old rugged cross, so despised by the world,
Has a wondrous attraction for me;
For the dear Lamb of God left His glory above
To bear it to dark Calvary.

Refrain

In that old rugged cross, stained with blood so divine,
A wondrous beauty I see,
For 'twas on that old cross Jesus suffered and died,
To pardon and sanctify me.

Refrain

To the old rugged cross I will ever be true;
Its shame and reproach gladly bear;
Then He'll call me some day to my home far away,
Where His glory forever I'll share.

That old hymn touches old chords that vibrate once more. It fills mind and heart with sacred moments, old memories, settings, associations and one is moved.

Good religion does that because we are finally not rational animals ruled by our head but emotional animals ruled by our heart. With two old men singing an old, beloved hymn it was not the moment to protest that Jesus died because of our sins, not to atone for them. Not the time to insist that it was the way Jesus lived that caused the way he died. There is a time and place for that. There was a time when I came to see that the death of Jesus as an atoning sacrifice for human sin was the heart of a religious exclusivism I could no longer affirm.

That growing, evolving understanding on my part which I shared with my people effected new symbols, liturgy, hymns but in no way removed deep emotional attachment to the earlier symbols and liturgical movements which shaped one, nor should that happen because those deep places in the heart remain alive and move us still.

A week ago Sunday was Pentecost. It was very warm so the air conditioning kept me in through the afternoon and early evening. But an hour before sunset I went out to our bluff overlooking Lake Michigan. There was a balmy breeze and the setting sun sent a path of gold to our shore. I reflected on Pentecost as celebrated in the Christian liturgical calendar – the breath of God, the Spirit of Jesus poured out on the waiting world. And I thought of today, Trinity Sunday. In that setting all of nature was alive and singing – every blade of dune grass, every fluttering leaf, every foaming wave as it caressed the sandy shore, the golden sun, the balmy breeze, and I was reminded of Barbara Brown Taylor's description of the cosmos shot through with divinity, with God, in her *Physics and Faith: The Luminous Web*. She writes,

When I am dreaming quantum dreams, the picture I see is more like that web of relationships – an infinite web, flung across the vastness of space like a luminous net. It is made of energy, not thread. As I look, I can see light moving through it like a pulse moving through veins. I know the light is an illusion, since what I am seeing moves faster than light, but what I see out there is no different from what I feel inside. There is a living hum that might be coming from my neurons but might just as well be coming from the furnace of the stars. When I look up at them there is a small commotion in my bones, as the ashes of dead stars that house my marrow rise up like metal filings toward the magnet of their living kin.

Where is God in this picture? All over the place. Up there. Inside my skin and out. God is the web, the energy, the space, the light – not captured in them, as if any of those concepts were more real than what unites them, but revealed in that singular, vast net of relationship that animates everything that is.

Marvelous imagery! The whole of reality saturated with the Spirit, the breath, that is the energy of the Sacred Mystery we call God, a Sacred Mystery we describe as Love because, at one moment in the luminous web that enlivens all that is, a face appeared – the *Logos* (Word) became flesh, and God, the X factor, that abstract Ground, Source and Goal of all there is became concrete. Now there was a clue as to the nature of the originating, everything-permeating, infinite Mystery that takes our breath away and gives us breathing room.

A deep sense of well being filled me, being one with the whole cosmic wonder resonant with God, and I began to sing...

On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross,
The emblem of suffering and shame;
And I love that old cross where the dearest and best
For a world of lost sinners was slain.

I had to smile at myself. But I thought of my conversation with my friend who
teared up at two old men singing George Bernard's old hymn and I was acutely
aware once again that the heart has reasons and Reason can't touch them.