

Round and Round We Go

Romans 8:12-17

A family had a friend of their daughter spend the weekend with them. On Sunday they went to church, a new experience for the little girl. On the way out of the service, she was asked what she thought about the church. She said it was okay, but she didn't understand why the West Coast wasn't included. Asked to explain, she said, "You know, when they said in the name of the Father, the Son, and the whole East Coast."

Humorous yes, but it also points up a lot of confusion about this Trinity stuff. We all talk about it, but when push comes to shove to explain it, we roll our eyes. I have occasionally told both my Sunday school class and my evening class that the Trinity is one of the most difficult church doctrines to grasp. Three-in-one and one-in-three can be mind boggling, to say the least. Even theologians avoid explaining it. We use the language – Father, Son, Holy Spirit, or alternatively, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. And we accept it, but don't ask us to explain it. It's just too elusive. I mean, let's be honest here. If a friend asks us to explain how the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are all one, but are spoken of separately, that they're different, yet the same, chances are we're going to look at them with a blank stare. But then we can fall back on that great theological escape hatch, "Well, you know, God is mystery, and we just weren't meant to understand all of it." That is actually true, but it can also leave us unsatisfied.

Many people down through the ages have used metaphors and other examples to try to understand the Trinity. The most common one is to cite water, steam, and ice as being separate but of the same substance. Another is that past, present, and future describe different Trinity has also been described mathematically as not being $1+1+1=3$, but rather $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$.

How about an egg? It consists of a yolk, white, and shell, but it's all one egg. We could keep going with this, but you get the idea. They aren't bad examples, but we are still left with some head scratching. One highly respected theologian and preacher said that "trying to use definitive terms to describe God is like trying to nail Jell-O to a tree – it quickly falls apart." He then said, "You might as well try to milk a gnat or sneak sunrise past a rooster."

At the risk of being accused of treading where only fools dare to go, I want to have a go at this Trinity thing. When I'm finished, if you don't understand it any more than you do now, well then I am afraid God is mystery and we just aren't meant to understand all of him. There, my escape hatch is cracked open.

I first sought advice from the apostle Paul. The message I get from our passage this morning in Romans 8 is that Paul doesn't make any attempt to theologically dissect and explain the Trinity. He easily and matter-of-factly interchanges Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as expressions of the Divine One. And then, my research confirmed for me that the term "Trinity" does not appear anywhere in scripture. It is simply alluded to, referred to, and accepted as truth.

Let's go back to Paul. He says there is a difference between living for self through the flesh, which is called egoism, and living for God through the Spirit, which is called Deism. Then Paul makes a crucially important statement. He says that those who live by the Spirit are adopted by the Father as children of God, and are co-heirs with Christ. This is not the language of equations and proofs; it is the language of relationships.

The equilateral triangle has also been traditionally used to represent the Trinity. It has three sides, all the same length and thus identical, yet forming a single shape. Again, it is okay as a representation, but I have never been satisfied with it. What if we used a circle to illustrate the Trinity instead of the triangle, or anything else that had three distinct parts forming into a unified whole? What would happen if, instead of trying to figure out whether we should refer to God as Father, son, or Holy Spirit, we focused on the nature of God that has been, is now, and always will be, in Paul's treatise, relational?

The circle goes round and round. It has no beginning, no end, and no point of weakness. Rather than the Trinity being defined by three hard sides, it is, I believe, better depicted in the circle where all are invited into a loving relationship with God. As we go round and round, we are embraced by, and interact with, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in seamless and uninterrupted ways. To see one aspect of the Trinity is to see all aspects of the Trinity, and it is to see ourselves in the same Trinitarian circle with God. There are no definitive points in a circle – it can only be described in terms of its wholeness, and not in parts.

Round and round we go with God in the dance of life. Within the circle of God, to dance with one person of the Trinity is dance with all three, and it is to dance with the rest of God's creation as well, with each other. Trying to define the Trinity is an academic exercise; to live it is human and divine. Let me illustrate with a story.

There was once a pastor who wanted one of his gifted laymen to really open up and let the Spirit lead him. Finally, the layman decided that one thing he could do was to take the youth group to do a small worship service for the residents of the local nursing home once a month. At the nursing home, the layman would stand at the back of the room and watch the youth do the service.

The second month they did this, an elderly resident in a wheel chair rolled over to where the layman was standing, reached out and took hold of his hand. He held it for the entire service. This scene was repeated month after month, the wheelchair bound nursing home resident and the layman from the church. Words were never spoken. Communication was solely through holding hands.

One Sunday afternoon the youth group went and held worship, but the man in the wheelchair was not there. After the service the layman asked one of the nurses what happened to the man. She told him he was in his room, near death, and encouraged the layman to go see him. He did. The man's eyes were closed, his face was gray, and his breathing was shallow. Instinctively, the layman took the man's hand and, led by the Spirit, he prayed aloud. When he said, "Amen," the elderly man squeezed his hand. The layman was so moved that he began to sob.

After a few minutes, he met the nurse again. She said, "He's been waiting for you. He said he didn't want to die until God came and held his hand. I tried to tell him that after he died he would meet God directly and be able to hold his hand. But he said, 'No. Once a month God comes and holds my hand and I don't want to leave until I can hold his hand once more.'"

Round and round we go. It's all in a circle. You tell me whose hand the man in the wheelchair held – was it the layman's, or the Father's, of Jesus', of the Spirit's? Or was it all of the above? We will never understand the Trinity by just trying to define it. We will only understand it by joining the circle and living within it. Round and round we do. Thanks be to God! Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 17 July 2011