

“Christianity in 3-D: The Trinity”
The Reverend William Warner-Prouty
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The idea of the Trinity has always held a certain fascination for me. Maybe it's because I grew up in a church called, “Trinity.” Maybe it's the Irish in me; according to Christian lore, it was St. Patrick who picked a shamrock to illustrate how three parts can be one. The balance of three intersecting circles carved into the ecclesiastical furniture of Trinity Church seemed to compound the three in a way that favored multiplicity over unity.

The idea of one God in three persons has always been a bit of a befuddlement, especially when you're growing up in the Church. What's so important about a Three and a One? It was a major theological compromise of the early Church. There were people who experienced God as the Almighty, the Creator, the One before Whom there are to be no other gods. There were people who were experiencing God's Spirit in an overwhelming way, like the rushing wind and fire that came upon those disciples gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost. And the lives of all had been changed by their encounters with Jesus of Nazareth, whose life and teachings had been made transcendent and whose presence still seemed to be among them, even though he was gone, especially when they gathered to remember, tell stories, break bread and share Elijah's cup, just as they had with Him.

With one God Omnipotent, one Lord Jesus Christ and one Holy Spirit, all three known in significant ways, how could they claim to believe in God alone in a world of clamoring with the claims of many gods and goddesses. Were Christians Monotheists or what? The Trinity provided the Big Tent unity they all craved, which is not to say that the subsequent history has been a harmonious one, but the Trinity did provide for different views and various experiences

of the Divine that is, after all, beyond any human understanding.

There's no mention of a Trinity in the Bible, yet people have gone to all kinds of lengths to claim the Trinity's Biblical foundations. Some have claimed evidence in the three angels who visited Abraham at a place called Mamre. Others have read Trinity in Isaiah's vision in the Temple when he heard angels singing, "Holy, Holy, Holy," a three-fold phrase we still say or sing as the Sanctus of our Communion. Even the passage we just read from John's Gospel has been used as Trinitarian evidence. The claim is that the three times Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you...," suggests the Trinity.

The question is: What makes the Trinity so important that people have gone to such lengths to explain or prove this idea? Why is an idea about the Divine so important that it has been given its own special Sunday. Today is not just a day the Lord has made so we can rejoice and be glad in it; is today Trinity Sunday so preachers can merely exasperate transcendental souls like Emily Dickinson? I think there is a clue to the answer in the encounter of Nicodemus with Jesus.

Nicodemus visits Jesus in the dark of night. He has heard about him and the significant things Jesus has been doing in and around Jerusalem, not the least of which has been to drive the money-changers' out of the Temple courts in Jerusalem. Nicodemus has been impressed, but he wants proof. He's after evidence that Jesus is who they say he is, the messianic "Son of Man" spoken of by the prophets of Israel. Nicodemus wants certainty, literal truth he can claim without any doubt. He wants a fact he can use as reassurance. What he gets is something that points beyond fact; he gets metaphor.

Jesus says those seeking the kingdom of God must be born anew, or from above, or born

again. The translations of this famous passage vary, but what doesn't vary is Nicodemus' literalness: "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus speaks in signs and symbols, as a poet and a prophet. Nicodemus is stuck in one dimension of reality, what is conceivable in the world as he has come to know it.

What I want to suggest on this Trinity Sunday morning is that the idea of the Trinity became a way of opening up the ways people think about and experience God. Humans experience the Divine in different ways in different places and at different times and relate those experiences to their reflective thinking. Even among the Church Fathers, there was a growing sense of multiplicity, many in one, as they worked out the Trinitarian paradox.

We are free to experience the wonders of nature as a pathway to the Creator. Read the New England Transcendentalists, Emily Dickinson, even. We are free to approach God's intentions for our humanity through the life of Christ. Pay attention to the Social Gospel. We are free to know the presence of God through inspired moments in our lives. Read and meditate and contemplate. Theresa of Avila and Thomas Merton have much to teach. One type of knowledge or experience is not an end but an opening to greater understanding. That, I think, is the claim of the Trinity.

In a world rife with religious conflict, it is reassuring to acknowledge that, if The Divine is immanent as well as transcendent, emanating and remanating throughout the Cosmos, as Jonathan Edwards wrote, then it's not a place for an Ultimate Either/Or; it's forever Both/And. The idea of God as Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit is a three-dimensional expression that points beyond any one form. It is an image of infinite possibility rather than either one or

the other, and we can only know in part, as St. Paul reminds us. I find the Trinity to be a hopeful metaphor of many dimensions, worth celebrating on this Trinity Sunday.