

AN INFINITY CALLED THE TRINITY

Scriptures: John 1:1-18; Romans 8:15-17

About 20 years ago a Harvard professor of psychiatry named Robert Coles wrote a book called *The Spiritual Life of Children*. He interviewed children from all over the world—all different races, religions, nationalities, and socio-economic groups—to discover their understanding of God. Sometimes he asked them to draw pictures of God. He writes,

Often children give God their own hair color; indeed, a blond Lord, a blond Jesus, give way to darker divinities as one moves from Sweden to Hungary and Italy, thence across the Mediterranean The same thing happens with the eyes—a preponderance of blue eyes in the drawings of Swedish children yields southward to brown and dark eyes (p. 44).

One day he was sitting with a group of four children looking at drawings of God they had done, and one of the children, a girl named Betsy, held up the drawing of a 10 year-old boy named Hal. She pointed out that Hal gave God the color of his own eyes and hair. Hal defended himself. He said, “No one has ever seen God, not before you die. So how can you know?” Then he pointed at the stack of drawings and said, “There’s no correct answer—they’re all right. You see God, and I see Him, and He’s how He looks to you and how He looks to me. He’s both. I asked the priest and he said so” (pp. 44-45).

I was struck by Hal’s argument: since no one has seen God we can picture God any way we want. Do you see a danger in that?

Larry did. Larry was one of the other children looking at the pictures with Hal and Betsy. He was 11 years old with dark hair, wide brown eyes, and a Spanish-speaking background. Larry said, “The priests here treat us [Hispanics] like we’re not as good as they are, their people. To them, Jesus must be Irish! They’d tell you—they’d draw Him as if he has the same color hair they have, the same eyes” (p. 45).

You see what happens? If you picture God anyway you want, you end up picturing God like yourself. Then you can use that picture of God to put down others who are different from you.

That, friends, is why we believe in the Trinity. Listen again to the last verse of our scripture reading—John 1:18: “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.”

Because we believe in the Trinity, we believe that God the Father is made known to us through God the Son. To see what God is like we look at Jesus. Which means that God cannot be made to look anyway you want. If God is revealed in Jesus, then God cannot be anti-Jewish, because Jesus was Jewish. If God is revealed in Jesus, then God cannot be the kind of God who turns away from the poor, the hungry, or the sick. Because Jesus fed the hungry, healed the sick, and brought good news to the poor. If God is revealed in Jesus, then God is not a vengeful God

but a forgiving God. If God is revealed in Jesus, then God is determined not to wipe out all the bad people in the world but to redeem them, even if it means dying for them. If God is revealed in Jesus, then the key to your future lies not in money or power or reputation or even education. It lies in your willingness to accept and live in God's grace.

In the chapter on drawing God, Robert Coles interviews a 10 year-old Jewish boy. The boy tells him, "Of course Christians will draw a picture of God; they see His picture all the time in their churches. Our God hasn't come here. He has spoken to us, but He's not appeared" (p. 40).

Did you notice how our scripture reading from John's gospel started out? It said, "In the beginning was the Word." In the Old Testament God does not appear; God speaks. God says, "Let there be light," and there is light." In the beginning was the Word. God promises to give Abraham many descendants who will become a great nation and bring blessing to all the nations of the earth. God is revealed to Abraham through the word of God's promise. God gives the law to Moses and speaks again through the prophets. All through the Old Testament God is revealed through words.

But then something new happened—John 1:14: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." Suddenly God was revealed to us not through a message but through a person.

It's like the difference between texting someone and hugging them, or like the difference between talking to someone on a cell phone and holding their hand, feeling their touch, actually having them there doing things with you and for you. Anyone who has ever tried to maintain a long distance romance knows that Facebook just isn't good enough. It helps, but it just isn't the same as having the person with you.

That is why Christians believe in the Trinity. We believe that God is not satisfied only to talk to you from a distance. God wants to be with you. God wants a relationship to you. Listen again to John 1:12: "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God." God wants us to make us not obedient slaves but loving and joyful children. If God wanted nothing more than obedient slaves, then God needed only to issue commands and punish those who did not obey them. But if God actually wants a relationship with you, if God wants to be a "father" to you, then the word must become flesh. The communication has to become personal.

The channel or conduit for this personal relationship is the Holy Spirit, which is the third part of the Trinity. In our first scripture lesson, Romans 8:15-16, Paul says, "For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God." Jesus is the Word of God made flesh—the historical human being in first century Palestine who showed us what God is like, who made God personal to us. The Holy Spirit is one who makes possible for us 2000 years later a personal relationship to that first century human person.

Notice how I used the words person and personal in that sentence. The Holy Spirit is the God who makes personal for us today a relationship to that first century human being who brought God to us in person 2000 years ago. Do you see now why Christian theologians insist on using the word “persons” to describe the Trinity? The Trinity means that God is one God in three *persons*. It is all about personal relationship. If God wanted nothing more than obedience, then God would have sent you a memo. Or maybe an email. But God wants a personal relationship with you, so God came to you in a person named Jesus, and God still comes to you in a person called the Holy Spirit.

How do you receive and experience such a personal relationship? You do it by faith. Faith, as the Bible describes it, is personal. It means trusting someone and committing yourself to that person. In the life of faith—in worship, prayer, listening to God in the scripture, talking to God as you go through daily life, and learning to see how God works in your life—in these ways God becomes personal to you. The Word becomes flesh.

One of the places where you can connect to God personally is here at this table. It is not called “communion” for nothing. At this table you are invited to communion with God—not just with each other but with God! Communion is the difference between friending God on Facebook and friending God in person. Communion is not just something you hear; it is something you touch. It is the difference between getting an email from God and a hug.

That is what the Trinity is all about: making the infinite, invisible, incomprehensible God personal.

- Ken Onstot
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