

"THE MAINTENANCE OF MYSTERY"

I HAVE A FRIEND WHO'S A CLOSE-UP MAGICIAN. IT'S ASTOUNDING TO WATCH HIM – LITERALLY - WORK HIS MAGIC.

JOHN ISN'T JUST MESSING AROUND WITH MAGIC.

IT'S HIS LIVELIHOOD.

HE STARTED DOING IT AS A WAY TO MAKE MONEY TO PAY HIS WAY THROUGH LAW SCHOOL.

ONCE HE FINISHED & BECAME A LAWYER, HE REALIZED HE COULD MAKE MORE MONEY PERFORMING MAGIC THAN HE COULD PRACTICING LAW & HE GAVE UP HIS LAW PRACTICE TO DO MAGIC FULL TIME.

I REMEMBER ONE EVENING SITTING WITH ABOUT A DOZEN OTHERS AS WE WATCHED JOHN DO HIS MAGIC.

HE VERY QUICKLY DISCOVERED THAT I COULD BE EASILY DUPED & SO HE USED ME ALL NIGHT LONG TO FORCE A CARD ON ME.

I'M NOT JUST TALKING ONCE OR TWICE.

HE DID IT BETWEEN EVERY ONE OF HIS TRICKS – PROBABLY A DOZEN TIMES IN ALL.

AFTER EACH TRICK, HE'D PICK UP A DECK OF CARDS & SAY, "*DENNIS, PICK A CARD.*"

EVERY SINGLE TIME, IT WOULD BE THE THREE OF DIAMONDS.

I'D TRY ALL KINDS OF THINGS TO THROW HIM OFF & KEEP HIM FROM FORCING ME TO TAKE THAT CARD.

I'D REACH ONE WAY & THEN QUICKLY SHIFT TO THE OTHER SIDE & GRAB A CARD.

IT NEVER WORKED.

HE GOT ME TO TAKE THE THREE OF DIAMONDS EVERY SINGLE TIME.

HOW DID HE DO IT?

IT'S STILL A MYSTERY TO ME, BUT I DON'T REALLY CARE TO FIND OUT BECAUSE I KNOW THAT KIND OF MYSTERY IS JUST MAGIC.

THERE'S AN EXPLANATION THAT I COULD UNDERSTAND IF I HAD IT SHOWN TO ME OR EXPLAINED.

THERE ARE MYSTERIES WITHIN OUR WORLD & WITHIN OUR FAITH, THOUGH, THAT *AREN'T* MAGIC.

NO AMOUNT OF EXPLAINING COULD EVER HELP US UNDERSTAND.

THE TRINITY IS ONE SUCH MYSTERY.

TODAY IS TRINITY SUNDAY.

LAST SUNDAY WE OBSERVED PENTECOST.

ALONG WITH CHRISTMAS & EASTER, PENTECOST IS ONE OF THE THREE MAJOR HOLIDAYS OF THE CHURCH.

TRINITY SUNDAY IS ANOTHER CHURCH HOLIDAY BUT IT'S A BIT DIFFERENT THAN THE OTHER THREE.

YOU CAN READ ABOUT THE CHRISTMAS STORY OR THE EASTER STORY OR THE PENTECOST STORY IN THE BIBLE.

YOU CAN MAKE A MOVIE ABOUT ANY ONE OF THEM.

YOU CAN PLACE EACH ONE IN A TIME PERIOD & SAY *“THIS EVENT TOOK PLACE AT THIS TIME IN THIS PLACE.”*

BUT WITH TRINITY SUNDAY, THERE’S NO BIBLICAL EVENT TO WHICH IT POINTS.

THERE’S NOT A TIME PERIOD OR PLACE IN WHICH SOMETHING HAPPENED.

THIS ISN’T A CELEBRATION OF AN EVENT, BUT A DOCTRINE.

YOU CAN’T POINT TO A PASSAGE IN THE BIBLE & SAY, *“THIS IS WHEN THE TRINITY HAPPENED.”*

IN FACT, THE WORD “TRINITY” NEVER APPEARS IN THE BIBLE.

BUT, THEN AGAIN, NEITHER DOES THE WORD “CHRISTMAS” OR THE WORD “EASTER.”

THERE *ARE* PASSAGES, THOUGH, THAT VERY CLEARLY GUIDE US TO AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE TRINITY.

IN THE GREAT COMMISSION AT THE CONCLUSION OF MATTHEW’S GOSPEL, JESUS CHALLENGES THE DISCIPLES TO *“GO, THEREFORE, AND MAKE DISCIPLES OF ALL NATIONS, BAPTIZING THEM IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.”*

PAUL CONCLUDES HIS SECOND LETTER TO THE CHRISTIANS IN CORINTH BY SAYING, *“THE GRACE OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST, THE LOVE OF GOD AND THE COMMUNION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT BE WITH YOU ALL.”*

TODAY, THOUGH, AS WE OBSERVE TRINITY SUNDAY, I DON’T REALLY WANT TO TALK ABOUT THE DOCTRINE ITSELF.

THERE HAVE BEEN ANALOGIES USED THROUGHOUT THE AGES TO TRY TO HELP US UNDERSTAND WHAT WE MEAN WHEN WE SAY & SING, *“GOD IN THREE PERSONS, BLESSED TRINITY.”*

WE USE THREE PARTS OF AN EGG OR THREE STATES OF WATER OR THE DIFFERENT ROLES EACH ONE OF US PLAYS IN OUR LIVES – MAYBE MOTHER, WIFE & SISTER.

ALL OF THESE ANALOGIES GIVE US A GLIMPSE, BUT THEY ARE ALL INADEQUATE.

THEY’RE INADEQUATE BECAUSE WHEN WE’RE TALKING ABOUT THE TRINITY, WE’RE TALKING ABOUT A MYSTERY.

WE’RE TALKING ABOUT SOMETHING THAT’S BEYOND OUR HUMAN UNDERSTANDING.

SPEAKING OF THINGS BEYOND OUR HUMAN UNDERSTANDING – CONSIDER THIS PASSAGE WE’VE READ IN THE BOOK OF PROVERBS.

THAT’S OUR OLD TESTAMENT LECTIONARY READING FOR THIS DAY – TRINITY SUNDAY.

WHY IN THE WORLD IS THIS A READING FOR TRINITY SUNDAY!?

THE OTHERS SEEM RATHER OBVIOUS.

IN THE EPISTLE READING FROM ROMANS, PAUL SAYS, *“WE HAVE PEACE WITH GOD THROUGH OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST...BECAUSE GOD’S LOVE HAS BEEN POURED INTO OUR HEARTS THROUGH THE HOLY SPIRIT THAT HAS BEEN GIVEN TO US.”*

IN THE GOSPEL READING IN JOHN, JESUS SAYS, *“WHEN THE SPIRIT OF TRUTH COMES, HE WILL GUIDE YOU INTO ALL THE TRUTH...ALL THAT THE FATHER HAS IS MINE.”*

THESE PASSAGES CLEARLY SPEAK OF GOD AS FATHER, SON & HOLY SPIRIT.

BUT WHAT ABOUT THIS PASSAGE IN PROVERBS?

IT’S LITTLE MORE THAN A MYSTERY.

IT SPEAKS OF WISDOM BEING PRESENT AT CREATION.

IT PRESENTS WISDOM AS A PERSON – A FEMALE NO LESS.

WISDOM IN HEBREW IS “SOPHIA” (AND I MUST SAY OUR OWN SOPHIA IS VERY APPROPRIATELY NAMED!).

I THINK THE REASON THIS PASSAGE HAS BEEN CHOSEN FOR OUR LECTIONARY OLD TESTAMENT READING ON TRINITY SUNDAY IS SIMPLY BECAUSE IT HIGHLIGHTS THE VASTNESS OF GOD & OUR LIMITED UNDERSTANDING OF WHO GOD IS.

SUCH AN EXPANSION OF OUR VISION TROUBLES US, THOUGH, DOESN’T IT?

WE WANT TO BE ABLE TO GET GOD INTO OUR MINDS & UNDERSTAND WHO GOD IS.

ONE OF MY FAVORITE QUOTES ABOUT THIS IS THAT *“IF GOD WAS SMALL ENOUGH FOR OUR MINDS, SHE WOULDN’T BE LARGE ENOUGH FOR OUR NEEDS!”*

SOME OF YOU MAY REMEMBER A HUGE CONTROVERSY IN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO THAT CENTERED ON A CONFERENCE IN MINNEAPOLIS WHOSE THEME WAS “REIMAGINING GOD.”

THEY ZEROED IN ON PASSAGES LIKE THIS ONE IN PROVERBS & TALKED ABOUT “SOPHIA” – OR WISDOM.

THERE WERE, ADMITTEDLY, SOME PRETTY BIZARRE IDEAS THAT WERE PRESENTED AT THAT CONFERENCE.

BUT I REMEMBER TALKING TO MY MOTHER AFTERWARDS.

SHE HAPPENED TO BE ONE OF THOSE WHO ATTENDED THE CONFERENCE.

SHE HAD JUST BECOME ACTIVE IN HER CHURCH & REALLY JUST WENT BECAUSE SOME OF HER FRIENDS WERE GOING.

SHE FOUND IT TO BE INCREDIBLY UPLIFTING & INSIGHTFUL & JOYOUS AND SHE WAS SO SURPRISED & DISHEARTENED TO HEAR THE REACTIONS THAT PEOPLE HAD.

WE’RE FRIGHTENED BY PEOPLE WHO TRY TO EXPAND OUR UNDERSTANDING.

WE’RE FRIGHTENED BECAUSE IT THREATENS US AND IT THREATENS US BECAUSE IT CHALLENGES US.

WE WANT SIMPLE ANSWERS THAT WE CAN WRAP OUR MINDS AROUND.

THERE WAS A LITTLE BOY WHO WENT TO HIS FATHER & ASKED HIM, *“DAD, WHO MADE GOD?”*

THE FATHER, ENGROSSED IN READING THE NEWSPAPER, SAID, *“BEATS ME, SON.”*

THE LITTLE BOY WOULDN’T BE PUT OFF, THOUGH, AND SAID, *“DAD, WHY IS THE EARTH ROUND?”*

THE DAD ANSWERED, *“I DON’T KNOW, SON.”*

THE BOY PLAYED FOR A MINUTE & THEN SAID, *“DAD, IS THERE LIFE ON OTHER PLANETS?”*

THE FATHER PATIENTLY ANSWERED, *“NOBODY KNOWS THE ANSWER TO THAT, SON.”*

FINALLY, THE BOY ASKED HIS FATHER, “DAD, DO YOU MIND ME ASKING ALL THESE QUESTIONS?”

THE FATHER PUT DOWN HIS PAPER & SAID, “WHY NOT AT ALL SON. HOW ELSE ARE YOU GOING TO LEARN?”

WE ALL WANT ANSWERS TO OUR DEEPEST QUESTIONS BUT FOR SOME OF THOSE QUESTIONS, THERE
SIMPLY ARE NO ANSWERS.

LET’S TAKE A STAB AT CONSIDERING SOMETHING THAT OUR TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING
OF GOD AS FATHER, SON & HOLY SPIRIT TEACHES US.

THERE WAS A GREEK THEOLOGIAN IN DAMASCUS IN THE 7TH CENTURY WHO CAME UP WITH A CONCEPT
CALLED “PERICHORESIS” (PERRY-KO-RAY’-SIS).

THE SPELLING OF THE WORD GIVES US A HINT AS TO ITS MEANING.

THE FIRST 4 LETTERS ARE “P-E-R-I” – AS IN PERIMETER OR MEANING “AROUND.”

THE NEXT 5 LETTERS ARE “C-H-O-R-E” AS IN “CHOREOGRAPHY.”

THE WORD PERICHORESIS LITERALLY MEANS “DANCING AROUND.”

WHAT JOHN OF DAMASCUS SAID IN THE 7TH CENTURY ABOUT THE TRINITY IS THAT THE FATHER, SON &
HOLY SPIRIT ARE LIKE 3 DANCERS HOLDING HANDS, DANCING AROUND TOGETHER IN HARMONIOUS, JOYFUL
FREEDOM!

YOU WANT TO TALK ABOUT SOMETHING THAT CHALLENGES & EXPANDS OUR VISION & IMAGE OF GOD!?

THAT IMAGE, THOUGH, REALLY SPEAKS OF RELATIONSHIPS.

THAT’S WHAT THE TRINITY IS ALL ABOUT.

IT’S ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS.

IT’S ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FATHER, SON & HOLY SPIRIT THAT GIVES US A GLIMPSE OF
WHAT OUR RELATIONSHIPS ARE TO BE WITH ONE ANOTHER.

IF GOD’S FREEDOM IS THE FREEDOM OF GOD THE FATHER, GOD THE SON, AND GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT TO
BE *WITH* AND *FOR* EACH OTHER, THEN TRUE HUMAN FREEDOM IS FREEDOM *FOR* AND NOT FREEDOM *FROM* ONE
ANOTHER.

IF, IN THE DIVINE COMMUNITY, THERE IS NO ABOVE & NO BELOW, NO SUPERIOR & NO INFERIOR, BUT
ONLY A FELLOWSHIP OF EQUALS – EQUALS WHO ARE DIFFERENT FROM ONE ANOTHER BUT RELATE TO ONE
ANOTHER IN MUTUAL OPENNESS, RESPECT & SELF-GIVING LOVE - SO SHOULD IT BE IN OUR OWN *HUMAN*
COMMUNITY.

IF THERE IS EQUALITY BETWEEN FATHER, SON & HOLY SPIRIT & IF THE TRIUNE GOD IS AT WORK IN THE
WORLD TO BREAK DOWN BARRIERS BETWEEN THE POWERFUL & THE POWERLESS, THAT’S THE LESSON FOR US IN
OUR OWN PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH ONE ANOTHER.

THAT’S THE LESSON WE CAN LEARN IN OUR VERY LIMITED UNDERSTANDING OF THE TRINITY.

THE TRINITY IS NOT A MATHEMATICAL PROBLEM TO BE SOLVED BUT A MYSTERY TO BE MAINTAINED.

IT’S A MYSTERY THAT OUR HUMAN MINDS WILL NEVER BE ABLE TO FULLY GRASP.

AND YET WE CAN CATCH A GLIMPSE OF WHAT GOD INTENDS FOR OUR *OWN* RELATIONSHIPS WITH ONE ANOTHER BY SEEING THE RELATIONSHIPS THAT EXIST WITHIN THE DIVINE.

IT'S A GLORIOUS DANCE WITH EACH MEMBER OF THE TRIUNE GOD HOLDING HANDS & JOYOUSLY MOVING THROUGH THE WORLD.

WHAT A MYSTERIOUS PICTURE OF GOD & WHAT A WONDROUS VISION OF WHAT GOD INTENDS FOR US.
AMEN.

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