

God's mysterious and paradoxical geometry

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on Trinity Sunday, the First Sunday after Pentecost, May 31, 2015.

*God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.
John 3:17*

Today is Trinity Sunday when we remember the three most important ways we know and experience God. The Trinity is summed up in the two historic Apostles' and Nicene Creeds as statements of our belief in God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier.

I was never much of a math student in high school, but of the two, I found geometry more interesting than algebra. I understand that it is common to have a preference for one or the other. It has to do with the difference between calculating letters and symbols that represent numbers and quantities versus the visual concept of points, lines, surfaces, shapes and solids. The Trinity is triangular, having to do with the three most important ways in which God is made known to us as well as in our relationship with God and each other.

The late Cardinal Cushing of Boston liked to tell the story of when he was a young priest he was called to the scene of an accident. He asked the injured victim in his South Boston nasal twang if he believed in the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. The man looked up at him and said, "I may be dying and you're asking me riddles?"

The Trinity is better experienced than explained. The world is in a state of continual creation and re-creation accomplished through the power of God's Holy Spirit. Each of us comes to an understanding of our relationship to God through our own personal experience. I can tell you what I believe, but you have come to your own belief through your own personal experience. Even though we know God is above and beyond human description, we ascribe our own finite human characteristics to the infinite God using such terms as the face, heart, hands, mind, voice, arms and the breath of God.

The use of these finite human terms to describe the nature of the infinite God is far from adequate. God is not bound by our human characteristics or by the limitations of time and space. To be made in the image of God doesn't mean that God looks like us, but that we are created in the way God intends us to be. Pantokrator is the Greek for God as the Creator of the universe. Paraclete refers to the Holy Spirit of God who is our protector, guide and advocate. With all our attempts at trying to understand and explain the nature of God, we can only have a partial understanding until all is revealed when we eventually stand face to face with God. In the Hebrew Scriptures Elohim describes God's creative and powerful nature. Jehovah or Yahweh refers to God's eternal nature. Adonai refers to God's dominion over all.

In our gospel story today, Nicodemus is part of the Hebraic religious establishment. By all accounts, he is a good man. He strives to do what is right and good based on the teachings of all the laws contained in the Torah. As a Pharisee, he maintains strict observance of the law that, for the Jewish mind, is the measure of all that is right and good. As a member of the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of Palestine, he is responsible for investigating false prophets who lead people away from the teachings of the Torah.

Although he is conservative, he is open to the thinking of others. When he hears about Jesus challenging traditional thinking he goes to see him personally. For the sake of discretion, he waits until night to visit him. When they meet, Jesus gets right to the point. He tells him that he must be born anew by water and the Holy Spirit. Understandably, Nicodemus is perplexed. How can he be born again after becoming an adult? How can he return to the womb and begin all over again? Of course, Jesus is talking about a spiritual rebirth based on the summary of all the laws to love God with all our heart, soul and mind and to love our neighbor as we love and respect ourselves.

To be reborn in the Holy Spirit is to start all over again. It is not enough to make a few convenient changes that don't cause any disruption in our life. A good place to begin is to be completely honest with ourselves that leads to personal integrity. It means changing our attitude toward those with whom we share our world. What Nicodemus doesn't fully realize is that he has

come face to face with the living God in the person of Christ Jesus. He is being challenged to rethink all his assumptions about God up to this point in his life.

The Trinity is not some doctrinal riddle. It is best understood relationally rather than intellectually. The threefold nature of God reflects our experience of knowing how the one God functions in three very distinct and important ways. There are numerous analogies of the threefold nature of God such as H₂O appearing in the form of liquid, solid or steam. It is also compared to an equilateral triangle that can bear great strength. It can also be compared with three overlapping circles of equal size. So much of life is trinitarian in nature, whether in families, friends or working relationships. God is always the third person in all our relationships. Both the Apostles' and the Nicene Creeds are historic statements of belief about how God as Creator of the universe took on human form to redeem the creation.

You may find some parts of the creed difficult to accept. It is important to understand that while portions of the creed are historical and factual other portions are metaphorical. They are statements of belief that express the very profound truth about our relationship with God who creates, redeems and sustains us. How the great and majestic God can be so intimately involved in each and every one of our lives is a great mystery. Saint Augustine wrote that, God loves each and every one of us as if there were only one of us to love. We can spend the whole of our lives and a great deal of money in therapy trying to get to know who we are. Until we come to terms with our inmost self, we can't love anyone else until we learn to love and respect ourselves.

We don't know what became of Nicodemus after his encounter with Jesus, but it appears that his life was changed dramatically because he appears once more at the end of the gospel narrative. After Jesus' death on the cross, Joseph of Arimathea goes to Pontius Pilate to ask for the body of Jesus for burial in his garden tomb. Nicodemus is there with him carrying the spices and linen cloth for the burial. We can imagine that his understanding of God was greatly enlightened. He would have realized that more than following a set of rules and regulations the basis of law is to follow the intent and spirit behind it.

More than a mere theological abstraction, the Trinity is a statement of our belief in how God creates and redeems and sustains us. The trefoil in the legendary shamrock used by Saint Patrick illustrates how the Creator redeems the creation through the power of the Holy Spirit.