

Holy Trinity (11June17) Matt28:16-20; 2Cor13:11-13;
Gen1:1-2:4a

Get ready to puzzle and puzz 'til your puzzler is sore, because this is Trinity Sunday. We start with an invented word. Trinity is a term made up to combine tri-unity, for three-in-one and one-in-three, talking about God in a mysterious way that can't be resolved.

Aside from the approximation in images of a shamrock or the stages of water, steam, and ice, or Jed's apple, this name and identity may actually be better pictured by items Jed couldn't have grabbed from his garage: a three-wheeled unicycle, or a one-wheeled tricycle. Or—worse still—both of those at the same time. I know: that's impossible. You can't figure it out. It's maddening. No one would want to stand up and say, "I believe in the existence of a one-wheeled tricycle" because it just sounds foolish. Most feel similarly about confessing our belief in the Trinity.

Yet if we tried to get rid of this explanation of God, in an effort to sound more reasonable, we'd not only lose out on our faith but also on the fun of foolishness, that stimulation of making our brains puzzle. As Justo Gonzalez—a Christian historian—and his wife Catherine write in the book *Heretics for Armchair Theologians*, "we know we are supposed to believe [this]...important element of Christian faith. But we really cannot make heads or tails of it, and we would much rather just mention it and move along to something else...But mystery has beauty and power only as we seek to penetrate it, as we see its far-reaching implications, as it overpowers and engulfs us" (78).

Still, if you're uncertain whether we should be considering how to speak about the Trinity and what in the world difference it makes for what we're doing here, then you may not be excited to realize that not only is Trinity a made

up term, it's not in the Bible! That really may have you wondering if we couldn't just as well fudgetaboutit.

But you're probably not going to like that solution much either. Even though Trinity is a later term, and even if it feels like it causes more confusion than it resolves, it's trying to comprehend what *is* described in the Bible. We heard two of the most concise forms of that, naming God as "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." There's your alternative. If you're trying to ditch the nonbiblical term "Trinity," then you're left with the name "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." That seems unfortunately masculine, and if we're trying to avoid exclusive lingo, we're stuck with this name.

So what do you do about it? Well, first, we should notice and reiterate there's no good reason to use the pronoun "he." While Jesus seems inescapably to be a boy, God isn't. We're limited in pronoun options, but "he" doesn't cut it for God. On the other hand, while the nouns for God were masculine (and gave us "he"), the Spirit is a feminine noun in the original language, so that should expand our sense of possibilities.

There are also plenty of examples of images for God that aren't exclusively male, and we should be using those. (And at MCC, we are.) I've also been reminding people this week it's not only about images of God as mother or nurse or hen. When we think of a judge or potter, those roles shouldn't represent just one gender. Even warrior metaphors, as the U.S. military is so slowly understanding, are not for men alone. So some of the problem isn't with the church but with more insidious human systems (as we'll discuss more in the [Faith, Sexism, and Justice](#) study a week from now.)

There is even diverse gender identity available for the clearly male Jesus. The church Hagia Sophia in Istanbul was once the biggest

church in the world. Its name can mean "Saint Sophia." But that name Sophia was actually referring to Jesus as "Holy Wisdom" (which we pick up on with the Benedictine nuns across Lake Mendota). The idea of Jesus as the eternal Word, the Logos, the shape of God's plans, rests in this feminine tradition of Lady Wisdom.

So instead of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit could we use "Mother, Sophia, Dove" or a generic "God, Wisdom, Breath"? I'd say it's presumptuous for us to re-christen God with a nickname or decide God needed some updating, as if God's name were the old-fashioned Mortimer, Buford, and Brunhilde and we jazzed it up as Matt, Buffy, and Bryn to make it sound fresher and hipper.

There's also risk in ditching this name. After all, Jesus himself tells us to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The reason we have baptism at all is based in this commissioning from Jesus. He says, "Go do this." So we've gone and done it. And if baptism can be compared to God staking out God's territory or turf, of God claiming you as God's own, imagine a geographic explorer taking a flag she had just redesigned, planting it in the soil, and saying "I claim this land in the name of Lady Liberty and Uncle Sam." We'd suspect it wouldn't be as valid with a made up or altered identity.

So if not a change, what about a substitution? In trying to remove the gendered nature from "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," some have taken to using "Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier." Now, it's said you can hardly you're your mouth about the Trinity without treading into something sticky the church long ago discerned to be a heresy. While I figure my feet are pretty well stuck in heretical muckiness and I even provoke that, still the kind of revision that labels God as "Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier" is the old heresy known as modalism.

It either means there's only one God who wears different masks (overemphasizing one, ignoring the differences of three), or else one part of God gets stuck with different jobs while the other two sit on their duffs (too deeply dividing three at the expense of one).

The real problem is that defining God by tasks is not how the Bible has it. We're not inventing these concepts from scratch, but trying to make sense of what we've received and experienced. Even aside from a name, throughout the story of Scripture, God is referred to as interactively relational. It's not like Jesus was on his own for redeeming or saving. He prays to the Father and receives the Spirit and—as we heard last week—shares the Spirit. We heard the reading from Genesis today because it is seen as portraying three different aspects of God, including Spirit and Word of God, amid creation. So trying to say only one part of God works as Creator wouldn't cut it.

Maybe a helpful step forward comes from the 4th Century theologian Athanasius (whose name is attached to the longest and most insistent of the three ecumenical churchwide creeds*, even though they aren't his words). In Athanasius' view, the Father isn't called that for being the Father of creation, but for being the Father of Jesus. Again, we are somewhat stuck with this language of God as Father because Jesus called God Father and taught us to pray "Our Father in heaven" and because Scripture refers to us as adopted children, too.

Notice the point of that relational terminology may be less about what it means to think of God in a fatherly way and more what it means for us to be counted as children of God. It's more for our sake than God's. The term Father (often more precisely and dearly called out to as Abba, the equivalent of Papa or Daddy) definitely shows us the relationship

* <https://www.ccel.org/creeds/athanasian.creed.html>

better than a term like Almighty or something indistinct like "Source of All." If we're describing God as caring and tender, or offering guidance and discipline, or fostering life by placing food on our tables, or whatever we might take as essential roles of parenting, that could just as well refer to God as Mother, which would keep or enhance the intimacy of the relationship. Jesus certainly could've called God "Mother." But he didn't. And I think it's weak to blame that on the culture of his time. As we'll notice, he's plenty countercultural, so it must be intentional he used "Father."

So a key aspect of the term Father, perhaps obvious to ancient ears but less so now, is that fathers had an inheritance to hand off. That would not have been true of mothers in Jesus' time. Our use of the term "testament" connects with "last will and testament," that when we gather here, it is about disbursing God's estate to God's heirs, of you coming to possess what's been promised to you. That is probably central to why Jesus and the New Testament call God "Father" and why it's so important that you are children of God. You inherit all that has been God's—all the earth, all responsibility, all forgiveness, all authority, all life.

At the same time as these terms are trying to define your relationship with God and your relationships with each other—that you are siblings always equal in possessions you're given—that clearly stands against other patterns. Jesus explicitly declares that you should call no one else "father" (Matt 23:9). It may seem harsh a week out from fathers' day, but that firmly declares that calling God "Father" is a protest against of every other patriarchal authority. The whole point is that God's will is counter to human culture and is anti systems of oppression. While we imagine we're doing the right thing by abandoning the masculine term "Father," the baby that gets

thrown out with the bathwater means we concede the argument since God loses that definition of overturning all hierarchies that subjugate and dominate and claim exclusive rights.

Since you are heirs of God equally there is simply no way to say that one is better than another or worth more than another. You are all children of God. Through a creating and a created and incarnate Lord, you see God present in the complexity and diversity and ordinariness of our lives, see your bodies and all creation as good. And with God as Spirit breathed out and alighting on all flesh, we are bound together and see the glory of God. That is where God will be found—not in a popularity contest or as the biggest boss on the highest throne—but always with you, always among you, always in relationship, for love, for life, and always opposing what would steal that.

It may seem utterly foolish to proclaim that that's our purpose, and not only ours but the shape and goal of the entire universe. And yet that foolish notion that comes from trying to comprehend a triune God, we call the good news and it's the very thing we'll risk spending our lives to figure out.