



IT TAKES THREE
SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 6: 1-8; MATTHEW 28: 16-20
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
June 11, 2017, Trinity Sunday
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My first introduction to the mystery, the divine transcendence of the number 3 dazzled my eyes and sang its sweet melody into my ears as a little girl once a week in Danville, KY— (Jeff play tune from “Three is a magic number” from School House Rock)

*Three is a magic number,
Yes it is, it's a magic number.
Somewhere in ancient mystic trinity,
You get three as a magic number.*

It was the church of School House Rock, at the altar of the almighty television on cartoon day—Saturdays, in the 1970s

3 was special. 3 was mysterious. 3 could do all sorts of amazing things.

No joke—3 is pretty amazing.

We see its symmetry throughout nature—in the ways bees build their hives, in subatomic particles, in leaf patterns and dragon fly wings and flower petals, and even in the bones of human fingers.

Three creates connection and structure and dimension.

Pythagoras was not just a mathematician whose adherents discovered the code of the right triangle, the Pythagorean theorem. He was the founder of a brotherhood in the 500s BCE whose use of math and philosophy profoundly influenced Western Philosophy and mathematics—Pythagoras saw how numbers showed up in the objective world and in music to provide us with keys to metaphysical mysteries of how the cosmos fits together and harmonizes.

Pythagoras' legacy isn't just about the symmetry of triangles and way the three sides of a right triangle will forever be related in a predictable mathematical equation. His movement was about the kinship of all beings.

3 creates stability, it creates efficiency, it creates strength.

3 has carried sacred meaning since human beings have been creating symbols, counting, wondering, hoping, praying—trying to connect with something beyond and within ourselves.

Three is about connection. It is about relationship. Three speaks to us about how connection and relationship can create well-being.

It's no wonder the number 3 takes up a prominent space in Christianity, too, in the doctrine of the Trinity.

It's always a good reminder on Trinity Sunday to recall some important things about this cornerstone concept of our faith:

- God is three in one—Father, Son, Holy Spirit, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer
- The doctrine of the Trinity is not in the Bible—although this doctrine draws from biblical language and metaphor for its 3rd and 4th century codification.
- The word Trinity was coined by Tertullian, who was a part of an early Christian movement that believed the Spirit was important in addition to God the Father, and God the son—that sounds like something we can get behind.
 - Unfortunately Tertullian was a part of a religious movement who may have been pushing for more room for the Spirit because of a belief the Spirit showed up in Montanus, the founder of their spiritual movement.
 - It's hard to say from the primary sources that remain, but the first impulses of Trinitarian theology may have been born out a kind of cult of personality.
 - The 3 was a hierarchical connection between Creator and the lesser Son and then the still lesser Spirit that showed up in their teacher.
- It wasn't until the Council of Nicaea (325 CE) that the Trinitarian formula became church doctrine and the equality of the three in one was clearly articulated. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were not in subordinate succession, but were equally and interdependently revelatory of God's relational nature and God's multifaceted way of lovingly reaching out into creation (Gregory of Nazianus, Cappadocian Father)
- God is self-communicating, God is relational, and God's very nature is connection that reaches out into the world creating, redeeming, and sustaining.

The baptismal formula we get from the Gospel of Matthew communicates this Trinitarian formula to us, but the Gospel writer did not have this theological formula at his disposal when he wrote these words.

The divine nature of Jesus isn't a clear theme in Matthew for starters.

Perhaps the most important three that shows up in this passage is not the language formula of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but the mandate for our faith to be something we share. The Christian faith is not a dyad between Jesus and me; the

Christian faith takes three—Jesus, me, and the world—and my faith must inform the way I connect with the world for it to be truly alive and true to who God is.

Christianity at its best is about connection; it is about a love that is nothing if not in relationships that create vitality and well-being.

I was newly married, fresh out of divinity school and in my first year of a PhD program in Religious Studies during John's first year coaching in the NFL.

Some wives started a Bible Study. The first meeting the team chaplain's wife who was leading the Bible study read a passage from Genesis about creation and explained that the "We" in God's voice was the Trinity.

I had learned Hebrew in Divinity School and this was one of the first things we learned—that the "We" in the Hebrew wasn't about the Trinity, but the royal "we"—a linguistic nod to God's majesty and mystery—but not biblical proof that the Trinitarian formula shows up in the first sentences of Hebrew Scripture.

Reading Trinity into Hebrew Scripture is dangerous for several reasons—but the one that should give us the most pause is the way such easy revision mistakes a human attempt to describe God, for God. The Trinity is a theological concept that points us toward God's character, God's mode of operation; the Trinity is not to be mistaken for God.

This is a fine distinction, but an important one that gets lost when we colonize pre-Christian sacred texts with our conceptual understandings of God's mystery. While we certainly find language, metaphor, and vivid images of God's relational nature in the Old Testament, we can diminish the mystery of God's nature when we make everything too quickly fit into our ideas and perspectives.

So that was the first contribution I offered to the newly formed wives' bible study. The second was my suggestion that we might consider additional perspectives on marriage than the one that mandated in chapter one of the book the chaplain's wife handed out for us to use for our study—how to be a submissive wife.

They didn't wait for my third contribution—two was enough. Yes, your pastor got kicked out of a NFL wives' Bible study because I believe the Trinity invites us into God's mystery not to colonize the Jewish faith with Christianity and because my faith teaches me that marriage is about mutuality, not subordination.

Relationships fractured over God's mystery are some of humanity's greatest tragedies. Such brokenness hurts much more than the people it divides. It rips and tears and frays the fabric of the universe—that is stitched together with kinship and connection.

Isaiah's call was about mystery—and the limits of human concept and convention.

Its ethereal imagery, its Holy, Holy, Holy invite us into a brush with the Divine—we can never totally see God, we can only overhear, we can only glimpse.

Holy, Holy, Holy—elicits in Isaiah a cry of woe—he realizes his inadequacy, the way his language by its very nature reduces or misconstrues God's mystery.

The Trinity, at its most generative, at its best, reminds us, startles us into this place of utter and irreducible mystery. At its best the Trinity is a check on our tendency to create idols, on our habit of creating God in our own image.

Three can create stability, it can create balance, it can create well-being when we allow it to teach us that interdependence and mutual relationship are embedded in the way we are made, in the way the Image of God shows up in us and in the way we connect to each other and to Holy Mystery.

God's mystery isn't simply about three—its about mutuality, its about shared power, its about the equilibrium created by open communication and interdependence between God, the world, and us. It takes all three.

How often do we truly take in that the cornerstone of our faith teaches us that God's very nature is to cooperate and connect and cultivate relationship, not to dominate and overpower and divide?

Our words about God so often get tangled up with dominance and hierarchy and marking our territory. God's threeness is about none of these things.

The mystical wisdom of three is all around us—from the bees to our pinky finger to mathematical equations to the mysteries of how God permeates our lives together.

Three creates connection, mutuality, and equilibrium.

Three becomes distorted when its lessons and wisdom are violated.

And such distortion is not hard to find in human life. Rule number one in healthy systems of relationships—don't triangulate—don't turn the triangle against itself. Triangulation creates disequilibrium in human families and communities.

Triangulation is about manipulating relationships to create confusion and harm. Triangulation is about using the three against itself—one person refuses to

communicate with another and uses the third as a go between or as a way to control, a way to harm. Triangulation is about sowing seeds of confusion and conflict in relationships in order to gain some perceived advantage.

It is a violation of the wisdom of three.

Triangulation spawns avoidance, disconnection, and distrust. And the one and only antidote to triangulation is open communication.

Such disequilibrium is no stranger to the church either. In fact, the very doctrine of the Trinity was one of the first major weapons of orthodoxy—it became the theological rationale for casting out, for exclusion, even for murder as a punishment for heresy.

What a bitter irony in our Trinitarian faith. Of all people, we, the people of the Triune God, should know how to live into the life-giving power of three. The wisdom of three is beyond our concepts, beyond our words, beyond our distorted illusions that we get power by taking power away from someone else.

Can we let God speak to us, again, of the mysteries of Creating, Redeeming, Sustaining love?

Brothers and sisters, let us practice welcoming God's mystery anew by emptying our hands, our minds, our concepts into a time of silence as we prepare for Communion.

Holy, Holy, Holy God, speak to us again of the mystical harmonies of your love.

(Jeff play 3 is a magic number tune—no words)

(Extended silence—silence broken by the song that we sing at the table.)

(When hymn into starts, MMS, SGB, and KR move to table to sing—printed out hymns at table)

Thanks be to God (before Great Prayer of Thanksgiving).