

“The One and Only G-d”

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Acts 2:37-47

1 Corinthians 2:6-13

A number of years ago, the pastor at my home church in Greensboro told a story from his childhood. Chris said that when he was very little and the family would go out in the car, his mother would say, “now, Chris, this car won’t start until you have your seat belt buckled.” I imagine he immediately buckled up. But, as he told the story, he said that in his little kid brain, when he heard, “this car won’t start until you’re buckled,” he thought that meant that the car literally would not turn over – mechanically could not move forward without the seat belts being fastened. It was one of those beliefs that lingers in the background, but you never really address directly. Then, he said, when he was a teenager, he was riding in the car with one of his friend’s parents and she didn’t buckle up and he was SHOCKED when it moved! He protested, “Well, that’s impossible! I thought the car couldn’t start...” and trailed off in embarrassment while his friend and his mother about laughed him out of the car.

Sometimes we think we understand things...and we do, but we don’t. In Chris’s case, what his mother said was true: she wouldn’t start the car without the belts buckled and so it wasn’t going to happen. What Chris understood was true: he needed to buckle up in order to get anywhere. As a child, he got the message he needed: safety is important and not negotiable. But as he grew, he gained a greater understanding, a deeper understanding about the role of choice in being safe.

In some ways, this mirrors our understanding of the Trinity. We can repeat, by rote, what the doctrine is: G-d is one and G-d is three – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But what do we do with it then? To be sure, it is one of the aspects of our faith that can be most confounding to non-

Christians. For atheists and agnostics, it probably seems logically and mathematically unsound: 3 does not equal 1. That's why we have different numbers for 3 and 1. For other monotheists – for Jews and Muslims and Sikhs – it must seem an impossible contradiction. G-d's oneness is absolute and sacrosanct. After all, we affirm with Jews the text from Deuteronomy, "The Lord is G-d, the Lord is one." That second part could mean "the Lord is one" or "the Lord alone." Either way, that's a pretty straight-forward Bible verse. And, I imagine, for polytheists, like many Hindus, our attachment to monotheism would be confusing. Why not just say you're a polytheist and have done with it?

Indeed, Christians past and present have struggled to say intelligent things about the Trinity as long as there has been a doctrine of the Trinity. Some abandoned it and became Unitarians, focusing on the divinity of G-d the Creator. Others could not deny the divinity of Jesus and became binitarians. And even, in our camp, there are those who believe in a Trinitarian G-d, but secretly or publicly hold a preference for one person over the others. Puritans in New England, for example, carried a heavy focus on predestination and G-d's eternal plan before creation. For them, the providence of the Father, involved in our history through covenants of works and grace and redemption over-shadowed all else. One historian even wrote that in their theology, Jesus was almost an afterthought – only significant as he served the almighty power, purpose, and wisdom of the Father. Starting in the 19th century revivals, Jesus overtook G-d the Father as the central person of the Trinity in many peoples' minds in our country. All of creation and the fullness of time radiated from Jesus' entry into the world and work in the world. Then in the early 20th century, Pentecostalism was on the rise. For them, the center of all life and worship, the center of the Trinity was the Spirit moving through our world.

Yet, our theology and our confessions hold that each person of the Trinity is equal – equally divine, equally to be worshiped, and that the same will of G-d works in all three persons. The Trinity is not divided or at cross purposes. So, we got pulled off course because the car won't start. We say G-d the Father is G-d the Creator, but all persons of the Trinity were part of creation. We say Jesus is Savior and Redeemer even though G-d the Father is regularly called our Rock and our Redeemer in the Old Testament. The Spirit is our comforter and our advocate, but couldn't we say the same of Christ, of the Father?

It feels strange to say “what a friend we have in the Spirit” or “in G-d the Father” because we often decide that Jesus is different than the rest of the Trinity. And apart from Pentecost and a few other Sundays, we may be giving the Spirit short shrift. Our reading from Acts comes after the birth of the church – the gift of the Holy Spirit to people from many nations. Peter, fired up in the Spirit, has preached to the crowds in the city and they are convicted and ready to convert and be baptized. The Holy Spirit came and Peter and the apostles preached and worked wonders and signs. They took the joy of the wisdom of the Spirit and they shared it with everyone they could find, spreading gladness and generosity and goodwill.

That's where we need the Spirit. Because it is one thing to feel G-d's hand working in your life, to find peace in prayer, to see G-d's purpose worked out in the world, to grow into the disciple that Jesus calls us to be. It's quite another to be able to testify to that G-d. To take the indescribable closeness and blinding glory that emanates from heaven and to find words that can help it become real for another. Is it any wonder that the task gives us pause?

There's a quote printed in the bulletin and I'd like to read it out to you now. It was written by Gregory of Nazianzus who was a great theologian, one of the Cappadocian Fathers whose writing and work were so formative to the early church. When writing about the Trinity,

he said, “No sooner do I conceive of the One than I am illumined by the splendor of the Three; no sooner do I distinguish Three than I am carried back into the One. When I think of any of the Three, I think of Him as the Whole, and my eyes are filled, and the greater part of what I am thinking escapes me. I cannot grasp the greatness of that One so as to attribute a greater greatness to the rest. When I contemplate the Three together, I see but one torch, and cannot divide or measure out the undivided light.”

On one level this is profound, beautiful – it feels true to me and totally relatable. On another level, it seems to say much and very little at the same time. The more we understand, the less we understand. It is the mystery of our G-d of many names and it is, in a very literal sense, stunning.

Our passage from Paul in Corinthians seems to pick up this thread of knowing and unknowing – of faith transcending human limitation. Immediately before this passage, he says that when he first came to Corinth and preached the Word, he didn’t focus as much on the mystery of G-d; he didn’t focus on lofty words of wisdom. He wanted them to know Christ crucified and to believe in the power of G-d. That was to be the foundation of their faith. But now, he says, we can speak wisdom to the mature in faith – we must go deeper because the car will move! G-d’s purpose for those who are faithful is beyond what we can see or hear, beyond what our hearts can even conceive. But the Spirit works to reveal the abundance of possibility to all humanity. Here, the Spirit is revealed as the person of G-d who is not just moving and breathing and setting hearts aflame. The Spirit is that which searches. The Spirit searches out the very depths of G-d and the Spirit searches out all that is within each one of us. It is the Spirit who teaches us things that we can’t quite fully know. It is the Spirit who reveals this impossible

wisdom. It is the Spirit and the Father and the Son, working together without competition, without disagreement, without disruption.

Meditating on the doctrine of the Trinity is for us a lifelong task. Our models for the Trinity are static and limited. The window on the bulletin cover is a visual representation of the Trinity: three hares for three persons, each sharing ears to show they are connected. Sometimes we talk about the Trinity as being like the properties of water: it can be a liquid, ice, and steam, but it's the same material. Another favorite is G-d as a rose bush: the Father is the bush, the Son is the rose, and the sweet odor is the Spirit. These analogies go some of the way, but they do not and cannot contain the fullness of G-d.

I would like to offer another analogy for you to chew on, limited though it is, that includes us in our understanding of the Trinity. We could see G-d as a pregnant woman: we and all creation are the child, Jesus is the placenta, and the Spirit is the nourishment. In G-d's goodwill, we are all intimately connected. All of G-d works together for our living, growth, and sustenance. We are held safe and we are loved even if it seems dark and uncertain where we are. Our G-d of many names, our G-d of many persons asks only that we love the Lord our G-d with all our hearts, with all our souls, and with all our strength, and that we love and serve our neighbors. And so, let us joyfully embrace the wisdom that resists easy naming. Let us bask in the warmth of the love and perfection of the Trinity even as we share this mystery imperfectly. Amen.