

Sunday, May 31, 2026
Trinity Sunday (Year A)
Genesis 1.1—2.4a; Matthew 28.16-20
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“The New Math of the Trinity (1+1+1=1)”

Those of us of a certain age probably remember “New Math.” Even if we didn’t quite know what it meant, we heard the term a lot back in the “Dark Ages” of our youth. New Math was a dramatically different way of teaching math that was popular in the 1950s through the 1970s. A way that was, at the time, quite controversial. Many of us here probably learned math the “new” way without ever knowing it, without ever knowing there was an old way. As a kid, when I heard something on the news about New Math, I sarcastically wondered (yes, I was sarcastic even as a child) so instead of two plus two equals four, under New Math does two plus two now equal five? Or three? Or some other number that changes depending on circumstances? I only recently learned that New Math was a shift away from merely memorizing mathematical facts and procedures to trying to teach children the underlying structures and concepts of mathematics. To more fully understand how math operated as opposed to just doing it.

Every year when we come to Trinity Sunday, I cannot help but think of New Math. That when it comes to the Trinity, we are dealing with a New Math, of sorts. That in Trinitarian Math, while one plus one plus one equals three, it also means that one plus one plus one equals one.

Yes, that is the gist of the most sacred, yet most bemusing, of theological mysteries. On Trinity Sunday, we once again struggle to find ways to explain the unexplainable, and we all walk away with a headache from trying to do the mental gymnastics of comprehending the Trinity. To comprehend what is often referred to as Three in One and One in Three. So, we might as well bite the bullet and dive in and look at the Trinity. This year, through the lens of New Math. Because, believe it or not, the underlying premise of New Math is actually applicable here, being helpful in trying to understand something of this mystery called the Trinity.

According to the doctrine of the Trinity, we believe in one God who is comprised of what theologians oh so confusingly refer to as three “persons”—a misleading label, to say the least. These “persons” are the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And yet, despite being three distinct “persons,” each with their own distinct characteristics, functions, and manifestations, the three are of one and the same substance or essence. And despite being distinct, each “person” is wholly and completely God. So, as Christians, we’re hopefully all good with the idea of worshiping one God. And as Christians, we’re hopefully all good with the idea of God being represented variously as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But it is in the reconciling of these two seemingly disparate concepts, these two conflicting and yet integral parts, where we run into trouble. More often than not, devolving into a variety of ancient heresies. All that said, I will attempt to explain at least something of the Trinity without the use of inadequate and heretical analogies, and hopefully without giving you—or myself—a headache in the process.

To be absolutely transparent, trying to truly understand the Trinity and how one plus one plus one equals three while also equaling one is just beyond our comprehension. Greater minds than ours have been trying for two thousand years to adequately explain the intricacies of the

Trinity. Eighteenth century Anglican priest John Wesley is purported to have once said, “Bring me a worm that can comprehend a man, and then I will show you a man that can comprehend the Trinity.” His point was not that human beings are incapable of knowing anything about God, but that we cannot fully comprehend God’s inner being—especially the mystery of the Trinity. Just as a worm lacks the capacity to grasp the nature of a human being, our finite human minds cannot truly understand the infinite God. At the same time, Wesley and the broader Christian tradition would still insist that God can be truly known, because God is revealed in Scripture, in Jesus Christ, and through the Holy Spirit. And I would add, in our observations of the world around us and in our relationships with one another.

This is where the concept of New Math comes in. As I noted, New Math was a shift away from rote memorization of mathematical facts and procedures and instead focused on learning the underlying concepts and structures that make math work. Looking at the relationships that are the foundation of mathematical principles so that students could more directly understand and relate to what mathematics is all about. That’s what we are really trying to do when we try to understand the Trinity. To move beyond blind acceptance of the fact that the Trinity is Three in One and One in Three and instead seek to understand what the Trinity means to us and to how we relate to the Trinity. And by extension, of how that informs our lives of faith individually and as a community.

Part of what makes this all so challenging is the fact that the Trinity is never mentioned in Scripture. The three “persons” of the Trinity, yes. We have numerous references to the various “persons” of the Trinity throughout the Bible. We even have references and insights to the relationships between various “persons” of the Trinity. Certainly in the Gospels we repeatedly hear about Jesus’ relationship to God—the relationship between the Father and the Son. As we saw last week at Pentecost, there are references to the relationship between Jesus and the Holy Spirit and between the Father and the Holy Spirit. Beyond these various “pairings,” there is very little bringing it all together. Very little to show how all three “persons” relate and operate as the Godhead. We are, therefore, left to infer how these various relationships come together in the Trinity. Which is what the ancients were trying to do in the development of the doctrine of the Trinity.

The closest we get to Scriptural references to the Trinity are a couple of passages in our readings for today. In our Old Testament reading from Genesis, we hear how on the sixth day of creation God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.” Look at the pronouns used. “Let US make humankind, according to OUR likeness.” The use of the first person plural certainly implies God as being more than a single “person.” Given what we know of the various “persons” of the Trinity from elsewhere in Scripture, Christian theologians have interpreted the use of the first person plural pronouns—us and our—to not be the “royal we” but rather pointing to the existence of multiple “persons” of the Godhead present at creation. If each of the “persons” of the Trinity are equally God as we believe, each of the “persons” would have existed from before the beginning of creation and would have logically been involved in the act of creation.

This and the various other references throughout Scripture regarding the interrelationship between the three “persons” coming together in the minds of the early Church leaders to form the doctrine of the Trinity. Serving a dual purpose. First, the Trinity points to the communal

relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as the one True God. Three “persons” operating as one—being one—even as they are unique individuals. And second, providing a way and a means for the faithful to explain their experience of the One True God. Experiences that are manifest in very different ways through each of the “persons.” God the Father being the Creator of all that is. God the Son being God incarnate, God who came in the flesh to provide direct contact between God and humanity, as well as being the means to our ultimate salvation through his death and resurrection. And God the Holy Spirit serving as the ongoing source of comfort, guidance, inspiration, and motivation to God’s people, sustaining us in our day-to-day lives and in our ongoing relationship with God. Coming together in the Trinity to help the emerging Church make sense of their individual and collective experiences of God in a variety of ways and forms.

The passage from Genesis—“Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness”—does not only say something about the relationship of the “persons” of the Trinity working together. It also sends a subtle yet powerful message as to who we are as God’s people. We are made in the image and likeness of the Triune God. Made to be in relationship, to be in community, as are the three “persons” of the Trinity. That it is through our relationships with one another in our communities of faith where we are able to see and experience the Triune God most fully. Where we are able to make sense—as much as we can, anyway—of the Trinity and what it means in our lives individually and collectively. Perhaps this is the most important example provided by the Trinity, particularly living in an age that is too often dominated by individualism, xenophobia, and divisions based on a variety of characteristics, such as gender and gender expression, race or ethnicity, sexual orientation, disabilities, and a host of other attributes. That we are ALL made in the image and likeness of God. As such, we too are relational beings, called to be in relationship and in community with God and with one another. For it is only when we are in relationship and community that we can even begin to more fully experience the richness and uniqueness that is the Triune God, Three in One and One in Three. To experience the richness of variety that is represented in the Trinity.

Which brings us to the second reference from today’s readings that give us some insight and guidance regarding the Trinity. Specifically, our relationship with the Trinity and the role of the Trinity in our ongoing lives of faith. In our Gospel reading from Matthew, we have the final encounter between the Risen Christ and the disciples. Here he commissions them 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, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the ages.” This is the first reference to all three “persons” of the Trinity in one statement. Reflecting the equal importance, the unity of the three “persons” in God’s ongoing work in the world. Just as we intuit from the passage in Genesis, the three “persons” of the Trinity were active and engaged in the work of creation. Only now, the followers of Jesus, the children of God, guided and supported by the Holy Spirit, are called to actively engage in the work of a new creation—the work of helping to build and expand God’s Kingdom. Work that we do by calling others into this work of new creation. Work that is only truly successful when done in community—in relationship with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and in relationship with one another based on the model of relationship first demonstrated by the Trinity.

Perhaps the Trinity and the role of the Trinity in our lives is a New Math, of sorts. That we do not blindly regurgitate what we have been taught, but rather view the Trinity as something to be explored and experienced so that we may more fully discern the community and relationship that is inherent to something that is otherwise unknowable. And yet, something which, when approached in relationship, in community, provides for experiences of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit working together to build up and strengthen our own relationships and community of faith.

When it comes to the Trinity, understanding isn't the point. Relationship is. For the Trinity is all about relationship. And the Trinity invites us into relationship, in all its fullness. Relationship with God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit; and with one another. As Brother James Koester, a monk in the Society of St. John the Evangelist notes so eloquently and succinctly, "When we celebrate the Trinity, we are celebrating not a mathematical imponderability, but a truth about the nature and being of God who is communion and community. We celebrate the truth that as women and men created in the image and likeness of God, we were created for community. And we celebrate that wherever we find communion and community, we find God" ("Brother, Give Us a Word," June 8, 2020).