

## **Heavenly Arithmetic**

Matthew 28:16-20

June 3, 2012

### **I.**

There is a story of the Sunday School teacher who asked her class why it's important to be quiet during the sermon. One of the kids immediately said, "Because people are trying to sleep."

This is the one of those times when preachers' sermons can have that effect. Today the calendar brings us to Trinity Sunday, which probably is dreaded equally by preachers and congregations.

And so I will try to distill this into a shorter sermon today, not only because this topic is best characterized by brevity, but also because when I finish, Jane Parrish, Coordinator of our 40 Days in the Word course, will speak to us about that program.

I'm reminded of the fellow who went to church once a year; not Christmas or Easter, but Trinity Sunday. He said he enjoyed seeing the preacher get so confused trying to explain the Trinity.

And then there's the preacher who was so unhappy about having to preach about the Trinity that he became a monk and took a vow of silence.

It's not a simple doctrine even though we have basic information that describes it. For example, the Catechism of the Church in the back of the Prayer Book defines one God as three persons, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (BCP 852). And later in the service we will say the Nicene Creed, which is divided into three parts, one each for the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In today's Gospel Jesus sent the disciples out to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And in Second Corinthians Paul offered the familiar blessing, "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (13:13).

This leads us to the foundational doctrine of the church, the doctrine of God. We venture into the mystery of who God is, and the experience of what God does.

We begin by imagining how the Trinity exists "out there," beyond time and space. This aspect of the Trinity is God in heaven. It's what the Trinity is, completely separate from us, even before the beginning of creation.

But we also recognize how God is present "down here," with us right now, within our time and space. This aspect of the Trinity reflects what the Trinity does, completely involved with us, everywhere in creation.

And they are the same. The Trinity out there beyond time and space is the same Trinity that acts down here with us right now. And we will see that love is the foundation of it all.

### **II.**

So, here we go. In exploring what the Trinity is, "out there," we might think about what the Trinity is not. There is not one God acting in three different roles. God is not sometimes the Father, sometimes the Son, and sometimes the Holy Spirit. The Father always is the Father only, the Son always is the Son only, and the Holy Spirit always is the Holy Spirit only.

The opposite question is whether the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit three Gods. We know that the Old Testament proclaims only one God. The coming of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit two thousand years ago was not the arrival of two more gods, but rather the revelation of additional aspects of the same one God who spoke to Abraham and Moses.

So, we have to think outside the box. The term "person" has an unconventional meaning. We ignore earthly rules of physics. We also disregard boundaries of time and space that limit us, but do not affect God. And there is a different math. One plus one plus one still equals one.

Let's take them in order. We normally think of persons as separate people with individual bodies and centers of consciousness. Each person is unique. If there are three people in a room, there are three separate people in the room. They don't all exist together as one person.

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are different. They are three separate but undivided forms of existence. Our laws of physics say three objects cannot occupy the same space at the same time. Forget that. Our laws don't apply. The three persons of the Trinity share the same single identity.

The Trinity also is beyond our time and space, and existed before creation as we understand it. God has continued from eternity past, and will continue into eternity future. There never was a beginning as we think of it, and there is no end. These familiar ideas of time do not apply to God.

People frequently look for metaphors or comparisons to describe the Trinity. But because our understanding of physics, math, time, and space do not apply to God, it is difficult to use examples that are limited by the language of physics, math, time, and space.

Here is a typical flawed example. God being three in one leads people to think of the familiar sewing machine oil of the same name. It's called that because one can contain a product with three ingredients; a lubricant, a rust inhibitor, and a cleaner.

The Trinity, however, is not a mixture of three separate ingredients, but rather an eternal assimilation of the characteristics and properties of each one into the other two while still remaining eternally separate. That is an impossible situation in our understanding.

People also have used the example of a clover, which has three leaves that comprise one plant. But that doesn't work either because each leaf always is separate and never part of another leaf, whereas the three persons of the Trinity are part of each other but yet separate and undivided.

And here's the last bad example. Some say that the Trinity is like water in its three separate states; liquid, steam, and ice. The error with that is that while a bucket of water can be in any of those three states, the same water cannot be in all three states at the same time.

God, however, is completely Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, while at the same time the three also remain as separate persons. To use the water analogy, we would have to say that the Trinity is like all water simultaneously existing as liquid, steam, and ice, while still retaining its separate properties. That kind of thinking can make my head hurt, and is best left as a mystery.

### **III.**

And so let's move from what the Trinity is, out there, to what the Trinity does, down here, which is more practical. Although we see that it's difficult to imagine who God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is, it's easier to experience what that same God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit does.

In this sense we think of God the Father as the creator from the Book of Genesis. And John's Gospel teaches that creation was accomplished through the eternal Word (1:1-3), which is another name for the eternal Son. And the Holy Spirit also was there at creation (Gen. 1:2).

John then recounts how Jesus became incarnate from the eternal Son, and came into the world and lived among us (1:14), even while the eternal unchanging Son remained part of the heavenly Trinity (Jn. 17:5, Heb. 13:8, Mal. 3:6). There was no vacancy in the Trinity while Jesus was here. We can grasp that because we already know the divine Son can be in two places at once.

And then after Jesus returned to heaven, the Holy Spirit came into this world and remains among us to this day, even though the Spirit also always exists in the eternal heavenly habitations (Heb 9:14). Like the Son, the divine Holy Spirit can be in two places at once, and in this world the Spirit reveals the Father's will in heaven.

#### **IV.**

But what does this mean for us today? Why is it important to understand what the Trinity is, out there? Why not just focus on what the Trinity does, down here, and simply recognize that God the Father is made known to us through Jesus Christ as mediated by the Holy Spirit?

Well, it certainly is part of our Christian life to place Christ at the center of our prayers and worship down here. But there is one more aspect as well. It goes to the essence of God out there, and that essence is love; a selfless, unconditional, and all-giving love that manifests itself through God's grace.

The three persons of the Trinity out there are bound together in this love; in an eternal communion among them that holds them together as one in eternity, and yet also overflows in abundance into creation and our lives.

And by grace we are invited to participate in that love with them in their eternal divine life. We, here on earth, can be part of the essence of what they share in eternity. Through the work of the Trinity down here, we can be transformed by the power of the love they share out there.

A way of summarizing it would be to know that when we contemplate what God the Trinity is in heaven, we experience the wonder and beauty that comes when we love God. And when we think of what God the Trinity does in the world, we can experience the joy and comfort of knowing how God loves us.

And when live in that love, God's heavenly unity will lead us to fulfill God's purpose of earthly unity as the model for Christian living. We can truly love God with all of our being, we can love our neighbors as ourselves, and our lives will be enriched. *Amen.*