

***Describing the One We Have Come to Know:
Beyond Default Unitarianism***

Matthew 28:16-20

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Have you seen the ocean? Last week Amanda told us that her little sister in Tennessee has never seen the ocean, and I thought about what it might be like to see the ocean for the first time, to be aware not only of the crash of the surf but of something endless, water that goes on and on forever.

That is something like what it is to experience God. Is the ocean the waves, or is the ocean the broad expanse of the sea, or is the ocean the deep, or is the ocean the rain falling from the sky? If I step into the water at Mansion Beach this afternoon, am I stepping into the same ocean as a swimmer in Portugal? The name of God as Father, Son, and Spirit is a way of saying that all the ways we experience God, and all the ways that people in other times and places have experience God, are one God.

And yet we should not make the mistake of thinking that our name for God *is* God. God is beyond all our names and all our descriptions. I grew up going to the beach on the Pacific Ocean in Japan. When we traveled I got to swim in the middle of the Pacific in Hawaii, and I swam in the other edge in Los Angeles. So have I been in the Pacific Ocean? Yes. But I have not been in all of it. Do I know the Pacific Ocean? Yes, but I do not know all of it. I traveled by ship from San Francisco to Yokohama, so I could tell myself that I have seen all of the Pacific, from east to west, but the truth is that I saw only one shallow sliver of the ocean.

We live surrounded by this mystery of the ocean, both the particularity of the surf on our feet and the idea of the unknowable vastness, as well as the breeze that comes off the sea. We are surrounded also by the mystery of God: the particularity of Jesus, the infinite Cause and Force, and the breath of God we feel for ourselves.

There is another mystery we encounter every day, and that is the mystery of personhood. Yesterday I officiated at a wedding in this room and I reminded the couple that the apostle Paul called marriage a great mystery. Love itself is a mystery to us still but even more basically every person remains a mystery. I can know your face, I can recognize your voice, and can predict some of your behaviors—but by no means all—but the person that is within and behind all those things will never be completely known by me. Every marriage is a marriage between strangers. This week Becca and I will celebrate our 33rd wedding anniversary, and while we know each other a heck of a lot better than we did when we married after just a few months, we know that we will never understand each other completely. Personhood is a mystery.

It's Father's Day, so we are thinking of our fathers, living or dead. Most of you have met my father, age 91, a regular visitor to the island. I have a sense that he and his motivations are easier to understand than those of my mother who was so intense and creative and struggled with depression. But the truth is that after 58 years of knowing him, my father remains beyond my knowing. Your father is beyond your knowing. So when we talk about God, using names like Father, Son, and Spirit, we do not imagine that by labeling a reality we have captured it. We are naming the mystery, acknowledging that God's love has no motive we can understand, that God's forgiveness is as outside our experience as his power, and that God is not after all an idea that we have constructed but an eternal person.

How has God been made known to us? The doctrine of the Trinity says that there are three ways that God has revealed himself. First, we see God in the created world and in human history, especially the history of Israel. This God we call Father, because he has shown himself to be Creator and the covenant-making faithful God. Second, we see God in the human Jesus—teaching, healing, loving, dying, rising. All of Jesus reveals God to us. Third, we see God in his power and presence in our lives today. We call this God the Spirit.

Are these three Gods? No. Are these three roles? Not exactly. The three ways we experience God are not just three functions of deity. I don't like to use a name for God like Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer—because it makes the Trinity sound like an organizational chart. Or worse, it makes the Trinity sound like a committee. God is not three gods or three modes or three roles, according to the early church leaders who argued about these things for a long time.

So the teacher Tertullian floated the idea of “three persons.” When he first said that, he may have meant three *masks*, but as Christians reflected on this idea there was an insight—because personhood itself is a mystery. Personhood is not mathematical or rational or easily diagramed. God is more like a person than God is like a formula or a chart. And, I think, it is not utterly foreign to us to think that one living being could contain three persons. Most of us go through periods when we feel like more than one person living in the same skin.

Eventually, at least this is my reading of history, it dawned on the church (and especially on Augustine) that if God is three persons, then God's very self is a community. God's very self is love flowing among those perfect persons. That's what the Bible means when it says “God is love.” The Christian idea of God is not simple monotheism. The Christian God is not the generic God who is all one, monolithic, defined only by one set of attributes. The Christian God is the Trinity. That, especially in the Eastern church, has long been the definition of a Christian—one who believes in the Trinity, as opposed to the many others in the world who believe simply in one God.

The German theologian Jurgen Moltmann—whom some would identify as a liberal—decried a few years ago what he called an “Islamicization” of Christianity when we focus on God as one rather than God as a God of relationships revealed in the cross of Jesus. “[Christians] hold that God is no single Lord in Heaven who rules everything, as a temporal ruler would. Nor do we mean some sort of cold power of providence who determines all and cannot be affected by anything... The triune God is a social God, rich in...relationships” [“The Triune God: Rich in Relationships, *The Living Pulpit*, www.pulpit.org, 2004].

That may be the greatest contribution of the doctrine of the Trinity to our knowledge of God—not that it “solves” in some sense the question of how Jesus and his Father and the Spirit can all be God, but that it reveals that God is relational at God's very core. God is love.

That knowledge is the first thing that is lost when we treat God as merely one. In the United States generally, but in New England in particular, the default position is not belief in the Trinity but belief in one God. A poll last week said that 93% of Americans believe in God. But which God? What kind of God? I'd be willing to bet that when that 93% said “God” the image of the Trinity—three circles interlocked, or three arcs joined, or three persons around a table, or crucified Jesus with an old man and a dove above him—I bet none of those images came to mind. The truth is that in our culture most people are default Unitarians, they just don't know it. That's certainly the God of civil religion and prayer breakfasts. On those rare occasions when islanders mention God, it's usually that one. The generic God we imagine is shared by all religions. I remember as a high school student reading about Hubert Humphrey, the “happy warrior.” The article was about the kind of religion that he and most politicians practiced, known as BOMFOG—“the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God.”

There was a court ruling some years ago stating that it was not unconstitutional to say “one nation under God” in the pledge of allegiance. But the judge’s reasoning was interesting. He said that the phrase “one nation under God” had no religious meaning. I thought that was insightful. A generic God is no god at all. A mere reference to God or to a Higher Power or to the Almighty is meaningless if not grounded in particular history and experience. Why would we expend any energy at all to get people to say that?

Baptists have been pretty clear from the beginning that we have no interest in worshiping a God that is not the one revealed in Jesus. In fact, we have no interest in worship if it does not involve worshiping Jesus. The generic non-Jesus God was the one co-opted by the King of England. It’s not nearly as easy to co-opt Jesus, and if you let Jesus into the Godhead you’re going to have trouble. It’s the generic God who is easily shaped into a national *paterfamilias* who will endorse your agenda. That’s the danger of nondescript monotheism. Ask the German Christians under Hitler, you’ll see.

So we return to a view of God that is more complex and mysterious than the simple monotheism of childhood. The Trinity affirms that we experience God as God above us, God among us, and God within us. The best way we have figured out in the church to talk about this is to say that while it is one God, we experience God as three persons—above as transcendent, among as God-made-human, and within as Spirit. And our best hunch is that this is not just a feature of our experience, but a feature of God’s being. That is, we think that it’s not just that we experience the one God in three ways, but that within the one God there are three persons—each of them with the mystery of personhood, and the one God who includes all of them more mystery still. Frederick Buechner expressed it this way: “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit means that the mystery beyond us, the mystery among us, and the mystery within us are all the same.”

In our Deacon retreat ten days ago, Terry led us in considering what is called a Trinitarian Compass—a way of seeking balance in our lives and in our church. The thesis is that a part of each of us corresponds to one person of the Trinity. An emphasis on the Father is natural for those who emphasize the intellect and nature, focused on creation and justice. An emphasis on Jesus is natural for those who emphasize the will and obedience, stressing following Jesus and reaching out to others. An emphasis on the Spirit is natural for those who emphasize emotions and relationships, focused on the intuitive and freedom. Our church is made up of mostly God-the-Father people and Spirit people—intellectuals and relationals, and has very few Jesus people. Our faith is, to a large extent, in our heads and in our relationships, and is very little connected to Jesus’ mission or teaching. According to the survey, this includes your pastor.

The way we understand our church’s mission—and our own vocations—is rooted in our understanding of God. What Terry and the book we were using by Christian Schwarz were urging us toward is a Trinitarian view of God. It is not that we should minimize our commitment to creation or justice issues, or our commitment to building relationships. But what we risk, especially in this culture, is defaulting to Unitarianism—or perhaps more accurately to the bland deism of our nation’s founders rather than the firmly Jesus-rooted faith of this island’s founders. It is the Jesus part of our understanding of God that moves us to understand God as one of us, that fills us with the desire to include and rescue those at risk, and the courage to challenge the status quo.

Some may be content with the simple God of right and wrong, the tit for tat God of karma, the God who just wants everybody to be good, who grades on a merit system even if it is on a curve. But those who have come to know God in Jesus can never be content. We know that the reality of God is more mysterious than that and more wonderful. We have discovered that

God includes within himself the human Jesus, the one who loved us and gave himself for us. We understand that the Trinitarian God is a God on mission in this world to remake it, to rebirth it, and to share the life and love he has within himself with us. For us it is never the old man with a beard we see when we look above; it is never the judge with his gavel; and it is never an impersonal Force. It is this Jesus, with his arms opened wide who defines for us the real nature of the Father and his Spirit. When we understand, as the song says, that Love is Lord of heaven and earth, how can we keep from singing?