

**Knowing the One God: Father, Son, Holy Spirit**  
**The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield**  
**Trinity Sunday, Revised Common Lectionary, Year A**  
**May 18, 2008**

We clergy persons have a love of books. There is nothing more deadly to my budget than a good book table at a Convention or Diocesan meeting; being turned loose in a bookstore is a dangerous exercise indeed. Hours can be lost wandering, exploring, dreaming—and the same could be said of spending time with a book catalog. And the publishers of the world—especially the world of spirituality and religion and theology—know this, and they are more than happy to oblige our appetites for words on paper. You would think after three years of seminary, where the assigned reading is nearly non-stop (with some of it being downright dreadful), and accumulating more books than I have space for, that I would be sick of it all. And yet—no.

So the catalogs come and I pour over them; even though they are full of more books than I could realistically read in a lifetime—bibles of all kinds, books on worship and liturgy and theology and prayer; books for adults, women, men, children, youth; books to help you revive your church, train leaders, run the best Sunday school or youth ministry; bible studies and reference books, hymnals and Vacation Bible school programs. There is even a book—dare I even tell you about it—called “101 Things to Do during a Dull Sermon.” Tons of books, so many catching my interest that I am nearly paralyzed between by my desire to read them all versus the knowledge that my time is limited (as well as my money!).

However, there seems to be a terrible shortage on books about the Trinity—where, for example, is the book ‘Trinity for Dummies’, or ‘The Trinity made Easy’? Could have really used it today. It’s not that I didn’t study the doctrine of the Trinity, but I can’t imagine you really want me to

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spend a Sunday morning talking all about hypostasis and ousia, prosopon or homoousios—all those Platonic Greek philosophical terms that helped shape the theology of the Trinity as it was worked out in the early church and first Church Councils. Now, this was no easy task—for by the time of Constantine there were a variety of opinions on the matter. However, Constantine felt a unified empire required a religion that had a unified doctrinal agreement. And so the Councils were convened—Nicea, Constantinople, Ephesus, Chalcedon (over a period of 125 years)—and the details of the theology of the nature (or natures) of Christ and the Trinity were argued out. The answers arrived at did not please everyone, but they have, by and large, held over the centuries. A quick summary is as follows:

*The Trinitarian God is said to be three persons, One God. The Councils' understanding was that of three hypostases (independent existences) in one ousia (being). These three hypostases of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are of the same substance (homoouios), and all equally co-eternal (having no beginning or end). Of these, the second hypostasis—Jesus Christ—is of two natures existing in what is known as a hypostatic union: fully human and fully divine all at the same time. None of these hypostases operate without the other, for it is not possible—they are of one mind; distinct but not separate.*

Got that? Right....

Over the years, there have been various examples put forth so as to make the whole theology of the Trinity a bit more understandable: the three persons in an eternal dance; the existence of the

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Father and the Son with the Holy Spirit being the Love between them; the illustration of the three-leaf clover by St. Patrick. All are good, all come close. All help provide a visual to something that is beyond our experience, they try to put a structure on that which (or who) is infinite.

And therein, perhaps, lies the problem. God is infinite, eternal, outside of time and not bound by physicality. These are all concepts that we recognize and can even talk intelligently about – but they are also concepts that we, as physical finite creatures living on a physical finite planet inside of time—cannot truly know, at least not now. We can talk of light-years and time travel, use the concept of infinity in our math equations, and even examine the formation of ancient far-away galaxies in our high powered telescopes—but we have to admit that these concepts are outside the realm of our direct experience.

God, however, is not.

The disciples knew this on the most basic of levels—that which moves and develop in the heart, in our very gut. They knew, as the ancient Hebrews did, that God was One, that there was only One God. In knowing Jesus as the Christ, they recognized all that they knew and understood of God as existing in the person of Jesus. And as they experienced the power and work of the Spirit, they recognized God there too. They had heard Jesus speak of the Father, of the oneness of the Father and the Son; and they also experienced the Spirit as God with them. Three

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individual existences—One God. All that God is exists in the Father, in the Son, and in the Spirit. Father, Son and Holy Spirit—the name of the one Trinitarian God.

The ancient Hebrews did not, or could not, even speak the name of God. To do so was to try to define the undefinable, tame the untamable, to show disrespect to that which they did not full understand—or could be expected to understand. To use purely logic and reason in matters of God was an exercise in futility—for they knew that it was only through faithful relationship to God and God's ways that they could come to know and experience God, learning to trust, to be drawn ever closer into God.

We too are invited to experience and know our Triune God, and to invite others to know God as well. We who have become part of the great story of love and salvation are directed—charged—to go out and share that story with others. We are told to go and make disciples—share what we know and invite others to learn and love with us. Logic and reason can help inform our experience so that we can effectively live and share the story, but they cannot be a substitute for our experience of and relationship with God. For that we need faith—that which goes beyond logic and reason. Faith that believes all things, even impossible things.

So if you can't find that perfect book that clearly explains all those complex theological concepts to you such as Trinity, take heart. God cannot be fully defined by our limited finite understanding—and perhaps that is how it should be. But remember that God can be known—

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and wants to be known by us. And it is that knowing that we come to better know ourselves and one another, reaching out to invite those of all nations into that ever growing relationship of love.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit—One God.

Amen.