

A drunk man who smelled of beer sat down on a subway next to a priest. The man's tie was stained, his face was plastered with red lipstick, and a half-empty bottle of gin was sticking out of his torn coat pocket. He opened his newspaper and began reading. After a few minutes the man turned to the priest and asked, "Say, Father, what causes arthritis?" The priest replied, "My son, It's caused by loose living, being with cheap wicked women, sleeping around with prostitutes and lack of a bath." The drunk mutter in response. "Well, I'll be." Then he returned to reading his paper. The priest, thinking about what he had said and how judgmental he had been, nudged the man and apologized. "I'm very sorry. I didn't mean to come on so strong. How long have you had arthritis?" The drunk answered, "I don't have it, Father – I was just reading here that the Pope does."

We ask a question and we don't necessarily get the correct answer. When we ask questions about God, and the Trinity, we will NEVER get the right answer. In fact, St. Augustine, who wrote volumes on the Trinity, said "If you are able to say 'this is God,' then you know it is NOT God." Augustine also said that "He who speaks of God, lies." So I'm going to tell you a few lies about God this Trinity Sunday – or hopefully, partial truths. God is incomprehensible – and all that we say about God will just be hints, glimpses, glimmers of this unfathomable mystery.

Not that will stop me from boring you with three more points! So here goes. First, why is it even important for us to know anything about the Trinity? Well, our image of God has a direct influence on who we become, whether we realize it or not. Good and healthy religion normally leads to good and healthy human development. False images of God lead to false images of ourselves and others and our world – and these are real blocks to our ability to grow into mature, holy adults. We are made in the image of God, but if we are not careful, we end up being made in the image of a FALSE god. When people tell me about their struggles with anger, a little digging generally reveals that they believe that God is angry with them. Those who struggle with compulsive work patterns have been worshiping a demanding God who is never satisfied with them. People who have a hard time trusting their hearts to others don't really believe in the steadfast love of God. (Help from Craig Barnes, THE PASTOR AS MINOR POET, p. 93). Our operative image of God helps create who we become. Loving people, forgiving people have known a loving and forgiving God. Cynical people are cynical about the very possibility of any coherent or loving Creator of the universe. So they become cynical about themselves and everyone else. (Adapted from Richard Rohr, daily posting 3/3/2013)

Second, a look at the Trinity and our language of the Trinity. First, it is impossible to say anything about the Trinity without saying SOMETHING heretical! We simply cannot describe God in human words without saying something that SOMEONE in the past was condemned for. Maybe even burned at the stake. So pay attention – there will be a heresy trial at the end of mass, and we have a pit of fire handy if we need it! If you emphasize the THREE more than the ONE, then you're guilty of polytheism, having more than one god. But if you emphasize ONE to the neglect of THREE, well, look out, we call that 'monarchianism.' Trying to avoid all male language about God, there was been a huge outbreak of modalism over the last 30 years or so. Woe be unto you if you try to describe the persons of the Trinity merely by listing the roles – or MODES – that they play: God the CREATOR, God the REDEEMER, God the SANCTIFIER. One feminist theologian described the Trinity in frustration as: "An old man, a young man, and a bird!"

No matter how hard we try, our human words cannot convey the super-human reality of God. God is a mystery that we can only partially understand. Which isn't to say that we haven't TRIED. The great Swiss theologian Karl Barth wrote his whole 13 volume CHURCH DOGMATICS based on the doctrine of the Trinity, and it wasn't even finished when he died! And some of his footnotes are longer than this whole sermon! So

don't imagine that we can tell the whole story of the Trinity in the space of one sermon, or you'll end up just as much a heretic as I am!

What I'd like for us to do for a few moments together is 'sharpen our pencils' as one of my teachers used to say, and to open our minds to the beauty of the mystery of a God who is love. To begin with, what words and pictures and thoughts come to mind when you think of God the FATHER? What does it mean to you to call God 'father'? Does it make you think of the stereotyped 'old man with a beard'? Or do you picture your own human father, enlarged a few thousand times? What kind of relationship do you have with a God whom you call 'Father'?

This is a hard one to begin with, because for most of us it means one of 2 quite opposite things. For some, a father-God is a wonderfully intimate and close image. Like Jesus, when He prayed and called God ABBA, 'Daddy.' This God is someone who protects us from harm, who feeds us when we are hungry, who provides for our needs. But for others, God as Father may seem quite distant and scary. Especially for people who never knew their human fathers, or who had a bad relationship with them. They may therefore perceive God as someone who has a great deal of power over them, but who does not truly care for them, and cannot be trusted. It is frightening to think that God might be like that. Yet, these two very opposite images of God as father do have something important in common: they describe a God who is over and above us. We might also use words like king, judge, or shepherd. Or ten-dollar theological words like omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent. When we think of God the father, we think of the God of all creation, the parent who gave life to all the earth. There are times when that is precisely the God we need. When our own lives go out of control, it can be greatly comforting to know that God is above it all and is ultimately in control. When the news we read and see seems to be all bad, and we feel tempted to despair, we need to be reminded that solving the world's problems is not our responsibility alone. No matter how improbable it seems at any given moment, God OUR FATHER, our MOTHER, is Lord of all creation. God is, ultimately, the one in charge.

In a sense, though, God the Son is more on our level. God as father is sort of 'up there,' 'out there,' 'over us.' But God the Son spent time 'down here,' with us, like us, as one of us. He experienced temptation; He got tired and frustrated with the demands made upon Him. He suffered pain, and He died. Sometimes, THIS is the God we need. At times in life when we are suffering and hurting, we can take comfort in knowing that God KNOWS what we are experiencing. Not just KNOWS it in an intellectual sense, but God knows hurt and suffering through personal experience and is therefore able to have compassion and mercy on us.

Also, when we are tempted, it's good to know that Jesus knows what it's like and somehow that makes it easier for us to admit it and move on. If we thought of God as only a stern judge, 'out there,' we might not have the courage to admit when we've done something wrong. But because we also know God as the Son we know that God can be understanding and forgiving. Therefore we are free to keep on trying, and falling short, and trying again.

However, when we think of God the Son, we often think in the past tense. We look back to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yes, we believe that He is alive, and that He has gone to be with the Father and will some day come again. But we focus mainly on the past: on the Word made flesh, 2000 years ago, and what He did for us then.

When we think of God in the present time, we can think of God as the Holy Spirit; God who is our comforter, our advocate; God who is with us here and now, and is infinitely close to us. God the Spirit, who bestows different gifts on different persons but gives them all for the benefit of all. God the Spirit, who helps us to live lives worthy of our calling, filled with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness,

gentleness and self-control. (cf Gal 5) God who interacts with each one of us as unique and special individuals.

So sometimes, God the Holy Spirit is the God we need. Not a powerful father, God of the universe – but simply a “God of ME,” a “God of YOU,” alone. A God who has given each one of us a unique set of gifts and talents not quite like anyone else’s. A God who acts, not only on a grand and cosmic scale, but in small personal ways as well. A God who prays with us and for us and through us, especially in those times when we don’t know what or how to pray. At times, THIS is the God we need more than any other.

Father, Son, Holy Spirit: three faces of the one God. Three names by which we know God .....not only three names, to be sure, but three names which carry a weight of rich tradition that we share with all who call themselves ‘Christian.’

Third, something that might help make this whole thing a bit more concrete. He works at a New York advertising agency. He is clever with words and images and can charm clients and coworkers with his easy wit. But sometimes the pressure drives him to the edge. His childhood was a horror: his father was abusive, driving his beloved mother to suicide, and his relationship with his brothers and sister is strained at best. He has a great deal to be cynical and depressed about.

That’s when his friend challenges him to ‘the game.’ When he lashes out in anger and depression, when he becomes overwhelmed by the demands of his job and feels the emptiness caused by the absence of a connection with family, when his pessimism and doubt are isolating and imprisoning him, she challenges him: “One beautiful thing.”

It’s a thing they do: Every day – or most days—they have to describe a beautiful thing they saw that day, one beautiful human interaction. It was a ‘game’ her parents played with her when she was little. Sometimes he balks at playing – but she presses him until he comes up with something beautiful, something good he witnessed in the course of the day: a city worker takes off his jacket and puts it around a homeless man sleeping on a heating grate one cold morning...a one-legged skier who keeps falling down but gets up again and again, refusing to give up....An elderly couple he sees at the hospital: For hours the husband sits next to his wife’s bed, reading to her, holding her hand, even though she’s asleep....the warm welcome her family extends to him when he finds himself alone with his dying father at Christmas.

He teases her for her Oprah-like optimism and pretends he is too cool and sophisticated for this ‘simplistic’ exercise. But deep down he admires her ability to find good amid life’s messes and disasters and wishes he was better at ‘the game.’ And she helps him realize the good and beauty that exists within himself – and how good he is at ‘the game.’ (Adapted from the novel TRUTH IN ADVERTISING by John Kenney). The Feast of the Holy Trinity celebrates the many ways in which we behold the love of God in the simple beauty of compassion, reconciliation and hope around us: God the Father, the author of love and all that is good; God the Son, the love of God made human; God the Spirit, the love of God that binds us to God and to one another as spouses, as family, as friends, as church. This is part of the gift of the Holy Trinity – in the midst of life’s difficulties and struggles, we can still find just one beautiful thing – and we find God. Amen. (from CONNECTIONS, May 2013, p. 4)