THE CONTINUUM

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on Trinity Sunday, May 31, 2015

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today is Trinity Sunday, which marks the conclusion of the church year. It begins with Advent, then moves through Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost, which was last Sunday. Trinity Sunday is a bit odd in that the Trinity is never mentioned in the New Testament. This church holiday came about through a theological understanding that took several centuries to emerge and was pretty much in place around the Fourth Century.

The Christian Tries to Teach the Hindu

I was having a discussion with a Hindu person a number of years ago, at a point in my life when I knew all the answers. I was trying to convince this fellow about the truth that I had about the Trinity and that he obviously didn't have because he disagreed with me.

Talking about Christianity versus Hinduism, we had gotten on the subject of the Trinity. I was enlightening him about how beautiful it is that we've got this notion of one God – you know, monotheism – but that the one God presents or manifests himself in multiple ways.

I was explaining an analogy used by the ancient Greeks, where it comes from the theater. When we say, "God in three per-sons," we're using a persona, a technical term in Greek theater. It was a mask that the actors would use.

Does God Switch Masks?

To this day symbols for the theater are two masks, one with a smile for comedy and one with a frown for tragedy. The actors would have several, usually behind their backs. They would hold the appropriate masks in front of their faces to signal the emotions of the characters being played at any given moment. Then they would switch masks when the characters changed.

And so we've got God as Father or as Son or as the Holy Spirit – three personae, three different masks for the way in which the invisible spiritual entity we call God manifests himself.

I was explaining all this to the guy, who was just not getting it at all, but his response was intriguing. He said, "You know, I agree with everything you said except it doesn't stop there for us. You've got the three. Great! However, in Hinduism we've got different job descriptions.

The Hindu One-ups the Christian

Instead of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we've got Brahman as the one big god, the

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big kahuna, and then we've got this circle of life with the interplay of Vishnu, the preserver, and Shiva, the destroyer. So there's the way in which the circle of life manifests itself from birth to death, and then the Phoenix rises out of the ashes over and over again. That interplay is governed by Vishnu and Shiva under the auspices of Brahman.

You keep going down, and you've got another whole layer below that of other gods and goddesses. You've got still another layer below that, and yet another and another, ad infinitum. You start adding it up, and you get nearly a thousand or so, and the interplay goes all the way down to the Atman, which is the portion of divinity in each soul. There's this continuation all the way from the big kahuna down to you and me in an uninterrupted line.

I'm Sitting There Like Whoa!

I'd never heard this kind of thing before. So while I'm trying to evangelize this guy, to persuade him, I was hearing something that was fascinating to me. I had been taught that anything a Hindu says is heresy, so that was my first response. But he had planted a seed in my mind.

As the Trinity is sort of a metaphor for God, you've got Creation, represented by Christ. Then you have this relationship, this flow that goes back and forth between the top and the bottom, between the whole and the particular, the flow represented by the Holy Spirit. I had to chew on that thought for a couple decades.

So does the infinite equal the one? Is Brahman equal to the Atman? Is there a portion of God, the big kahuna God, capital G, manifested within each and every one of you?

In Poetry, the Infinite in the One

Here is a portion of a poem by William Blake that you will easily remember:

> "To see the world in a grain of sand and
> a Heaven in a wild flower,
> Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
> and eternity in an hour."

It's a poetic way of saying, "There's that connection between the whole and the particular."

And here are a few lines by Annie Besant of Theosophy fame:

> "O hidden life, vibrant in every atom,
> O hidden light, shining in every
> creature,
> O hidden love, embracing all in
> oneness,
> May all who feel themselves as one
> with Thee,
> Know they are therefore one with every
> other."

So is it true? Does the infinite equal the one? Is there heaven in a wildflower? Can you hold infinity in the palm of your hand? These are not easy questions to answer because it certainly doesn't seem so.

Following the Line of Continuation

Let me offer some examples. Here's where it might get a little tough.

Benoit Mandelbrot, a French mathematician from the middle part of the Twentieth Century, is the one who came up with the equations for what is now called fractal

geometry. This uses the notion of self-similarity to support the idea that a portion of the whole is similar, equal to, very much like, looks the same as the whole, all the way up and all the way down the line of continuation.

To illustrate the meaning of self-similarity, have a look at this fern leaf. [Art points to the various segments of the fern's leaf.] So this portion of the leaf looks the same as this other portion of the leaf, which looks the same as that portion of the leaf, which looks the same as the next portion of the leaf. In biology, the analogy eventually breaks down, but not in math. The math keeps going all the way down and all the way up the line.

Self-Similarity on Multiple Scales

Look at a cloud; pick a cotton-ball kind of cloud. Look at a portion of it, a nodule off to the side of the cloud, and if you have chosen carefully and were able to slice that nodule off, it would look very much like the whole. And then a nodule *on* the nodule would look the same as or similar to the whole cloud. All the way down, all the way up.

Now look at the branches of a tree. The trunk up to the major branches looks like the following branches. Take one of those major branches and go to the minor branches. They look for all the world like the minor branches going to the littler branches. They in turn look similar to the little branches going to the twigs. There is self-similarity all the way through the different sizes.

Analogies for the Continuum

And that's an analogy for the continuum between the connection, between the whole and the particular.

Another example, this time from physics, where there's something called a hologram. I did this experiment myself and had a lot of fun doing it. You make a little scene, and it must be three-dimensional in order to achieve the expected effect. What I did was to create a still life with a bouquet in a glass vase on a small tablecloth. For depth I added some peaches and grapes to make it look like one of those classic still-life paintings.

Then I shined a laser beam onto the scene and took a special holographic photograph of it. After development of the film, an amazing thing happens. It's seriously amazing. Next I shined a laser beam through that picture, and it produced a three-dimensional image. Astonishingly . . .

. . . It Doesn't Matter . . .

. . . Where on the picture you shine the laser beam. So here's your picture; you shine the beam in any corner, and you get the 3-D image. Move the laser and shine it in a different corner, and you get the same picture. No matter where on the picture you aim the laser, you get the same picture back.

This means that the information for that scene is located everywhere on the picture. It's a little like DNA in that the information for your body is located in every cell.

One more example, and this is the one that's most meaningful to me. The others I like;

they are cool. But this is the one that sort of gets me at a gut level, and that's because I like math. Okay, I'm in the minority on that, but I really do enjoy math.

Now I want you to imagine a line for a moment. Okay, here's zero, and it goes infinitely in that direction [points to his right], and it also goes infinitely in the opposite direction [points to his left]. How many points are on the line? Remember from your algebra class that there's an infinite number of points on a line because as you start counting, it's like, well, you just keep going, so it must be infinity.

The Number of Points on Any Scale Isn't a Number; It's a Concept, And It's Always Infinite

However, between zero and one, how many points are there? Here's zero, and here's one [holds his hands out about one foot apart]. Infinite again? Well, that just can't be right. It doesn't seem right. It's counter-intuitive. It must not be right, except that it is. And if that weren't bad enough, it's provable.

I have memorized one of the proofs. But I have been told that there are more than twenty different proofs for that one propo-sition. There are an equal number of points between the ends of any line segment, between zero and one and also in the whole infinite line without any end. (See diagram in the Addendum on page 6.)

Do you understand how these examples of self-similarity or continuation illustrate what the Hindu guy was saying? The continuum goes from Brahman, all the way down to the individual and the soul within the individual. There is an unbroken connection all the way. Infinity does equal one, and that's actually provable.

Richard Rohr, a Catholic priest out in Ari-zona, addressed this kind of thinking with these kinds of examples. By the way, they are called holons, which are examples of the part replicating the whole. I've given you examples from biology, physics, poetry, and math. Rohr says that:

We Are Never Whole Apart from Connection with the Larger Whole

> "These [examples] imply that there is an inherent sympathy between God and all created things. All things, every human, creature, and even human-made objects are somehow manifestations of formlessness.

> "In this view we don't need to grade or classify things as good or bad, valuable or worthless. God can use anything and everything to teach, delight, help, and challenge. Each of us replicates the whole and yet has a certain wholeness within ourselves.

> "But we are never entirely whole apart from connection with the larger whole. Holons create a fine language for what are called the mystery of participation for understanding how holiness transmits and how God's life is an utterly shared phenomenon. If you try to be holy alone, you're not holy at all."

And then he concludes this way:

> "Salvation is not a divine transaction that takes place because you are now morally perfect but much more is an

organic unfolding, a becoming of who you already are. An inborn sympathy with and capacity for the one who created you.

> "Each being is both a part that is like the whole and yet also contributes to the whole."

And then his final sentence is the one that is the reason I'm reading it to you:

> "This is the basis for the inherent dignity of everything and is the foundation for all nonviolence."

Creator, Creation, and Flow

So Trinity Sunday. In your Bulletin are listed some of the different ways in which we name the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer; and a few others.

The one I'd like to suggest to you is Creator, Creation, and Flow. That word "flow" is actually a translation of an ancient Hebrew word. It is considered one of the highest words for the name of God. Atsilut is the term, and it means flow or emanation. It's like a river, something that just keeps flowing.

And so the idea is that you have the whole and the particular. You have the Creator and the Creation. You have the one and then the manifold.
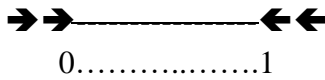
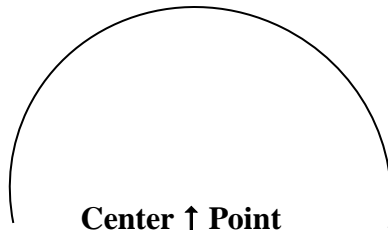And the flow is that constant back-and-forth of energy, of life, and of love.
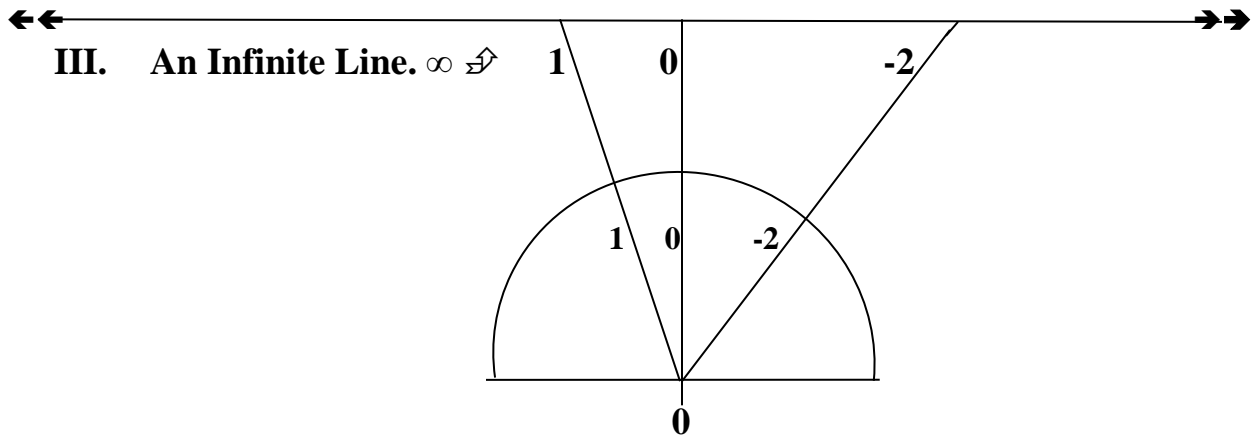
Amen.

(See Addendum on page 6.)

Addendum

A GEOMETRIC PROOF OF THE
EQUIVALENCY OF INFINITIES

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I.   **A Line Segment of Length 1.**

Center ↑ Point

II.   **Bend the Segment into a Half-Circle.**
It Is Still the Same Length.

III.   **An Infinite Line.** ∞ ✍   **1   0   -2**

1 0   -2

0

IV.   **Imagine a half-circle of finite length and above it a line of infinite length. One could draw a line from the center of the half-circle to any point on the infinite line, and it would pass through the finite half-circle. Thus, there is a corresponding point on the finite half-circle for every point on the infinite line.**