

THRICE BLESSED

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on Lent V, Sunday, March 13, 2016

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

The sermon this morning is a bit philosophical. I'll try to make it as practical as I can, but I'm going to be only partially successful.

Choosing Among Dualities

In our daily lives, we encounter a lot of dualities. For example, you're doing the laundry, and the clothes are in baskets on the floor. Are they dirty or clean? And so you pick up the dirty ones and throw them into the washer. Then you have to choose between hot or cold water. And when they're done, you throw them in the dryer. The dryer finally buzzes, and you go to check on whether they are dry or still wet.

We run into many dualities all the time, some unexpectedly. You're at the bank making a deposit when you realize it is being robbed. Afterward the cops ask you, "Was the guy tall or short?" And the getaway car, "Was it light or dark in color?" And after they kidnapped you and threw you in the trunk, "Was the road rough or smooth?"

Recognizing Trinities

Now trinities is the subject I really want to talk about today. They're deeper, more substantial than dualities. For example, you've got the past, you've got the future, but you also have a third entity, the present. You've got "here," you've got "there," but you also have this space in between.

Trinities are probably most obvious in relationships. Imagine a pair of sisters. They're close. You've got sister "one" and sister "two," but there is also a distinct entity consisting of "them," the sisters. We have marriages. You've got Bob and you've got Elizabeth, but there is a third separate entity, the Neills. The two Neills individually are a duality, whereas the connection between the two plus the duality constitutes a trinity.

My parents were married for 67 years. They had only one e-mail, Al and Helen Suggs. Their e-mail was ahsuggs, together forever. (They lived in the South before they came up North and moved in with Tracy and me.)

When I used to call them up, in a sort of tip of the hat to the South, I would always begin the conversation with "How y'all doin'?" They loved it. They would always chuckle, and the answer was, "Oh, we're fine," regardless of which one answered. If one was in a bit of trouble, it didn't matter. "We're fine." And then the conversation went back to the duality: "How is Al doin'?" "How is Helen doin'?"

LOOKING AT ANOTHER TRINITY: Divinity, Humanity, Relationship

Of course, you've got the Holy Trinity — the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who are in the invocation that begins every one of my sermons. Another way of looking at it is that you have divinity, humanity, and their relationship, also a trinity. You have

God, you have humanity, and then you have energetic, intelligent, loving “us” — the context in which we live out our lives in relationship with divinity and in relationship with the balance of humanity.

This trinity gets blurry, however. I’m convinced it’s blurry on purpose because it doesn’t want to settle on one or three. That is, God, humanity, and their relationship are one, indivisible, and that’s why the three elements are blurry. They are both one thing and three things.

So this morning I plan to go quickly through three more trinities for you. (I thought about calling this sermon “Three-Squared,” but it sounded somewhat nerdy. So it’s “Thrice Blessed.”)

TRINITY NUMBER ONE:

The Three Temptations

The First Temptation. We looked at this one toward the beginning of Lent. In Luke 4, Jesus has just returned from his 40-day fast, and then Luke says he was tempted by the devil. Of course, he was hungry because of the long fast, and so the very first temptation is: *“Hey, while you’re at it, turn this stone into bread.”*

The Second Temptation. And then in the second one, the devil shows Jesus the kingdoms of this world. “I’m the boss of it all,” the devil says. *“You will have unreserved power if you will worship me.”*

The Third Temptation. The temptations get worse. “Throw yourself off this pinnacle,” the devil says to Jesus. If you, the reader, have ever been to Jerusalem, you may have seen the Temple Mount area, where the Wailing Wall is all that is left of the original temple. It’s very high, about four or five sto-

ries up. *“Throw yourself off. Not to worry, the angels will bear you up.”*

And so those are the three temptations. But what we have tried to do is to look at the symbology of them. What were they trying to say? On the face of it, this temptation is a bit silly.

The Three Temptations Are Countered With Three Profound Virtues

The First Virtue. So we talked about the first temptation, commanding the stone to become bread, which symbolizes materialism. This is countered, as are all three temptations, with a quote from Deuteronomy: “Thou shalt not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.” *Materialism is countered with simplicity.*

The Second Virtue. And then the second temptation from the devil was, “I’ll make you king, ruler of all.” The temptation is coercion. Jesus would be the boss. He would be able to order everybody around. He would be an emperor. *Coercion is countered with service.*

The Third Virtue. The third temptation to Jesus was to throw himself off the high wall of the Temple Mount. The devil enticed him with assurance to: “Keep in mind that the angels will bear you up, but they won’t bear everybody up. That gets tedious.” So instead they will bear Jesus up. The temptation is privilege. *Privilege is countered with humility.*

The three temptations are countered with three profound virtues that are lifted up to these universal types of temptations — countering with simplicity, service, and humility.

TRINITY NUMBER TWO: Faith, Hope, and Love

The second trinity is one that I have never preached on before. I can't tell you how much I repeat myself these days, but I've never talked to you about this one, and it's sort of strange for me to do so now.

If you've been to a wedding lately, you'll find that I Corinthians 13 is the favorite text. It's the love chapter in First Corinthians, and it concludes with: "So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love." Tony Blair read it in the most beautiful way I have ever heard at Lady Diana's funeral, but I'm sure you've all heard it in a lot of situations.

Let Me Start with Hope

On the Sundays when I'm not preaching but am in church, I have a chance to sit where you sit. Honestly it's a bit of a strange experience for me because I'm used to looking out and seeing that gorgeous flaming Pentecostal banner hanging from the balcony. And if you look at the stained glass in the very top of the window above the balcony, you can see a small but beautiful piece of blue stained glass that Clare Price made to replace the broken glass that used to be there. It has a dove on it, symbolic of the Holy Spirit, and it's lovely. So I look out at you and the banner and that stained glass in particular.

What *you* see is the decorative organ pipes. (The real pipes are hidden in a chamber behind the simulated pipes.) You also have a chance to see the angels now and then. They're sometimes blurry because of a cloud, but in bright sunlight you can see a view of the three angels flying high on the left chancel wall in a beautiful display of

colors cast by the stained-glass windows above them. I have to crane my neck around to see that.

You also see the communion table with the Bible, the flowers, the candlesticks, and an ornate cross. That cross is front and center for a purpose because it is emblematic of hope. The risen Christ, our standard universal message, is not depicted on the cross in Protestant churches because our orthodox theology emphasizes the living Christ, who has won the battle against death.

Thus, the risen Christ stands as an emblem of hope, constantly whispering to our soul that the universe is *not* meaningless, that the universe is *not* ultimately tragic, that *not* everything is red in tooth and claw, that life is *not* inherently nasty, brutish, and short. Rather, the ancient Platonic ideals of truth, beauty, and goodness suffuse the universe. The empty cross before you whispers that message to your soul, whether or not you're paying attention to it.

Let Me Continue with Faith

So hope at the beginning, love at the end, faith in the middle. Faith is the means. It's the hard one. And here's why it is hard: We have a tendency to think that as we go through our lives, making decisions where we confront a path that we choose, believing it is superimportant that we make the right choices in life. We've got the big ones, like what school to attend, who would be the right life partner, and what choice to make for the best career. And then there are a thousand other secondary choices to make.

Faith is an unsettling thought that maybe it doesn't matter much, that maybe God will bring grace and beauty and truth and goodness to bear upon our lives regardless of the

path. Whether you choose the right school, whether you've chosen the right person or the right career, all of us have made those kinds of mistakes. When we look back and find that past mistakes have revisited us for the good, that's faith. No matter which path we take, which mistakes we make, we trust that God will bring grace to withstand the thorniest path, despite the hardships along the way.

Let Me End with Love

It is at the other end of the trail. Love is the final end, the all in all. God is love. "Love lasts forever" is one of the lines earlier in I Corinthians 13. Fears subside over time. Anger abates over time. Violence spends itself and becomes exhausted over time. "Love lasts forever." Love is the only thing that lasts, and it is ultimately what God is and ultimately what you are, deep inside.

So hope, faith in the middle, ending in love.

TRINITY NUMBER THREE: The Way, the Truth, and the Life

John 14 is the Bible passage that's so misused. I've talked to you about this one before. Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." This is the verse that unfortunately is used as one of *the* most exclusionary passages in the Bible. It's like a proof text that Christianity is the only right religion and all the others are wrong. Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, all other non-Christians are wrong because Jesus put it right out there. It's in black-and-white. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life," and then comes the follow-on clause: "No one comes to the Father but by me."

However, it behooves us to understand that Jesus spoke in Aramaic. Thus, the English text of the Bible is actually a translation of

the Greek, which is itself a translation of the Aramaic, which in turn is what Jesus spoke. And if you want to look at the Aramaic version, pick up an Aramaic Bible and study it. You will find a radically different reading, a gentler, deeper, and more accurate understanding of Jesus' words, where I AM is the name of God, straight out of Exodus. "Who is it that is sending me?" Moses asked. "I AM" is the answer. And then immediately after uttering God's name Jesus says, "the way, and the truth, and the life."

The "way" is a translation that's quite accurate. The Aramaic behind it is "path," the way that you choose, your pilgrimage. The "truth" refers to the "decision points" on the path. This overriding metaphor indicates that each of us is on our own pilgrimage. The truth is the decision points that we make, those forks in the road where you've got to go one way or another. Are you going to choose this school or that school? This person or that person for a lifetime partner? This occupation or that occupation? And there are a myriad other decisions that you will make while journeying on the path.

Jesus Is Saying, "God Is Our Path."

God is the decisions that we make as we follow our path and encounter the forks in the road, and then finally your life. The Aramaic behind that is much more power, strength, and virility, the energy that is supporting it all.

Now look again at what he's saying, "God is our pilgrimage." God is our intellect and heart coming to bear on the forks in the road of our pilgrimage, and God is the strength behind it all. It's poetry. It's beautiful when you look at the whole of it. I AM all these things. God is all these things. Another way of wording it is that, if you add up your

path, your choices, and your energy, it's your life. God is your life. But notice, it's not three things. It's three aspects of one thing.

Now at an emotional level instead of an intellectual level, if you begin with hope and you end with love, faith is the means. Faith is the vehicle that gets you from hope to love. *Once again, it's not three things, it's three aspects of one thing.*

The way, the truth, and the life is one thing, a trinity — the path, the decision points, and God. Our lives are suffused with, respond-

ing to, and in communion with, the rest of divinity.

And finally, seen from a different angle, the birth of hope and the path of faith arrive into the fullness of love.

When we see the beauty and the magnificence of love, when we step back and look at the whole of it for just a moment, we then see love's utter simplicity, and it motivates us to service and engenders humility within us.

One thing.

Amen.