

# WHAT WE KNOW FOR SURE

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs  
Preached on Trinity Sunday, May 22, 2016

*In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

## **The Sequence of the Church Year**

During the sermon last Sunday, I made some fun of Pentecost. I referred to it as the ugly stepchild of the Christian holidays, which is of course completely true, but it needn't be bandied about. I felt a twinge of guilt about that, although it dissipated pretty fast because Trinity Sunday is even worse than Pentecost.

The sequence of the church year is not like the calendar year. The church year starts with Advent, which begins the Sunday right after Thanksgiving, plus or minus a few days, and then you have the four Sundays of Advent that lead up to Christmas. The twelve days of Christmas are followed by Epiphany on January 6, when we recognize the visitation of the Magi.

Then there's a brief break, after which comes the unusual holiday of Transfiguration Sunday, in remembrance of that unique event, which is recounted in the gospel. This is always the Sunday before the season of Lent begins. And then we have Ash Wednesday; the entire season of Lent, culminating in Holy Week, Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday; and finally, in the springtime, Easter. Fifty days later, there's Pentecost, the giving of the Holy Spirit, considered the birthday of the church.

One more holiday is tacked on for good measure, Trinity Sunday, the crown jewel of the Christian year. However, ask your aver-

age person what's special about Trinity Sunday, and he or she will typically respond with something like, "Well, whatever."

## **Cappadocian Fathers Tack on Trinity; Their Words the Bane of Seminarians**

In a sense, it *was* tacked on. At the end of the Fourth Century, in the late 300's, the three Cappadocian Fathers, from a place in Turkey, were some of the leading theologians of that era, in the Fourth Century after the death of Christ. Basil the Great, bishop of Caesarea, his brother Gregory, bishop of Nyssa, and another Gregory of Nazianzus, the Cappadocian Fathers articulated the doctrine of the Trinity, which has been with us ever since.

The three fathers came up with some difficult concepts, which are the bane of seminarians everywhere: *Consubstantial* means that the three persons of the Trinity — the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit; the creator, the redeemer, the sustainer — have the same substance. They are consubstantial. Even worse, *homoousios*, a Greek term in which "ousios" stands for "essence," meaning that the Trinity are of the same essence. So regardless of how God presents, as creator, or redeemer, or sustainer, the same essence is behind the Trinity.

The Trinity that I love, actually the one that got my attention and gave me a feeling as though I had gotten it, is in the hymn that we will sing right after this sermon: "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty." In it are

the words “God in three persons, blessed Trinity!” The notion of the three persons of the Trinity actually goes back several hundred years before Christ, and it comes from the Greek theater.

To this day, the symbol for the theater is two masks, one with a happy face and one with a sad face. In ancient Greek theater, typically an actor would play multiple parts, and the way you could tell what part was being played was the mask being held in front of the actor’s face. The mask was held on a stick, and when an actor had to change parts, he put a different mask in front of his face from among two or three or four of them hidden behind his back, depending upon which characters the actor was playing. The mask was called a *persona*.

Okay, I can get it now. God has three different masks, different ways of presenting to the audience, but the same essence, the same substance behind the mask, only one actor.

### **Complaints about Trinity Are Twofold**

One complaint is that the Trinity is never mentioned in the Bible. You’ve got trinitarian formulas, so to speak, like we’re supposed to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, but the Trinity itself is never mentioned, and so 400 years later the Cappadocian Fathers finally settled their disputes enough to include the concept of the Trinity.

But the other, more substantial, complaint is that the Trinity is *way overly* theological. I mean such words as “consubstantial” and “*homousios*.” It’s like, does it have anything to do with our real lives? Can your average person rightfully ask, “What’s this got to do with anything? Does it have any practical value? Why should I care?”

I’m going to try to answer that question. But first, let me ask if you notice a theme. I’m going to give you a list of six; tell me if you notice a theme.

### **Trinities in Ancient Egypt, Ancient China, and a Double Dose in Buddhist China**

**1. Ancient Egypt** — we’re talking four millienna ago. They worshipped Osiris, Isis, and Horus. They didn’t have a monotheism at all but rather a trinity.

**2. Ancient China** — even more than four millennia ago, long before the overlay of Confucius and the Buddha and the Tao. The indigenous Chinese religion venerated heaven and earth, and the human being as a mixture of both.

**3. Buddhist China** — and then, with the overlay of Buddhism, China brought in yet another trinity. They had trinities of three poisons and three antidotes, three problems and three resolutions, or a fulfillment of those problems. The three poisons were ignorance, desire and anger, and they operated together, sort of like a tag team. It worked on everybody.

Here’s the way the three poisons operate. I drive to my job in the morning; I see a car that’s better than mine, and I begin to desire it, so desire is ignited in my heart. I see a better house, a better car. Somebody takes a vacation to Europe, and I have a staycation in my backyard. You name the thing, and there are a thousand of them. A desire is ignited in my heart.

But then I think, “Hey! How come the church doesn’t pay me more so that I can buy this other stuff? How come I have to pay so much

in taxes that I cannot afford all this other, nicer stuff, which of course I deserve.” And so then I start to have feelings of anger that work in tandem with my desire, all because I am too stupid to realize that the better car, the better house, the better vacation won’t bring me happiness. I think they will, but that’s because I’m not smart enough to realize it will work only until I think of something beyond that, once I get the better car.

So the interplay of ignorance and desire and anger are the poisons of our lives.

The antidote, according to Buddhism, is a trinity: Buddha the teacher, Dharma the teaching, and Sangha the community, in which we learn a wiser way to live through life. So there’s an overlay of two more trinities: The three poisons and the three antidotes.

### **Hegel, Mystical Judaism, and Hinduism**

**4. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel** — (1770-1831) influenced a century and a half of philosophy with thesis, antithesis, and synthesis — the dialectic, the flow between those three in our intellectual lives.

**5. Mystical Judaism** — the Kabbalah is full of trinities of various types, even one found in the actual name of God.

**6. But a Marvelous Trinity** — comes from Hinduism, where you have Brahman as basically the equivalent of God the Father, God the Creator, but then rather than the Redeemer and the Sustainer, you’ve got Vishnu and Shiva as the Preserver and the Destroyer. Looking at the impermanence of life, no matter what it is that we look at, whether it’s a mountain or a butterfly, it comes into

existence and then goes out of existence. And so the interplay of preservation and being destroyed is all within God.

The Christian formulation, therefore, is one of many and fits into this perennial context. Christians tend to think that we sort of have a monopoly on trinitarian thought, but rather it is older than the hills and is found everywhere.

### **A Spiritual & Mystical Principle. Part I: A Trinity at the Deepest Level of Reality**

There is a spiritual and mystical principle that is at play here. It has two parts. Part One is that there is a trinity at the deepest level of reality. We can view it in Christian terms, Buddhist terms, Hindu terms, Kabbalah terms. It doesn’t really matter, but there is a trinity at the deepest level of reality.

Our core misunderstanding as average people is that we tend to view the trinity as a still picture, as a snapshot rather than as a video. We tend to view it as a noun rather than a verb. And so we have a notion that the Trinity is like a noun rather than the flow between creation and redemption and the “sustaining spirit.” So that’s Part One.

### **Part II: The Dance of the Trinity Is Fertile; It Produces a Fourth Different Dimension**

Indeed, one of those other Greek terms that you have to learn in seminary is “perichoresis,” meaning “the dance,” applied to the essence of what the Trinity is. The dance.

Part Two of this is that the dance of the three is fertile, and it produces a fourth that is of a different dimension, of a different order of magnitude than the other three. This, my friends, is a deep thought. Let me give you some examples so you get a feeling for this:

Take a seed and earth, and bathe the two in sunlight and warmth. And you don't get just a seedling. You get the biosphere. You take a sail and a rudder, and you bathe them in the wind. And you don't get just a sailboat, your little Sunfish out on the lake. Rather, you get the beauty, even the exhilaration of sailing and in addition you get things like travel and exploration and trade.

You take a nucleus and an electron, and you bathe them in an electromagnetic field. And you don't get just an atom. You get the material world. Oceans and mountains and galaxies. You take a man and a woman, and you bathe them in a fragrant garden with moonlight. And you don't get just a child. You get a family and a community and the human race.

### **Christ-Consciousness Bathed in the Holy Spirit Is the Fourth Dimension, Love**

So now, why should you care? The Trinity of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. What is the fourth thing that emerges of a different order of magnitude from those? I submit to you that it is love. You have the dance

of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Of the Creator, the Redeemer, the Sustainer. Or another way is the unmanifest and the manifest in the bath of the spirit, and it produces love. You are part of the dance of the three.

As a child of God, as either a son or a daughter of God, you are part of the dance. The dance generates, gives birth to love, which I suggest to you or remind you is *the* most powerful essence, force, concept in the history of the world. The practical value, therefore, is a glimpse of our place in the universe.

At various times, every single one of us will ask, "What is the meaning of life? Why am I here?" We get a glimpse, now and then, of our place in the universe, of our place in the dance, the interplay of creator parent with you, and your measure, your apprehension of Christ-consciousness, bathed in the Holy Spirit, generates the loves that surround and infuse you, whether you are fully aware of them, apprehend them or not.

An awareness of this, a gut feeling for it, is the peace that passes understanding.

*Amen.*