

$$1 + 1 + 1 = 1$$

**John 14: 25-26; 2 Corinthians 13:11-13**

*Preached by the Rev. Carolyn Grohman at North Presbyterian Church, Williamsville  
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I am indebted to my daughter Debbie for the title of my sermon this morning. If you look at the title, you may wonder about my ability in math. Now I have to confess that math was never my strong suit, but even I know that  $1+1+1=3$ . Doesn't it? Well, not necessarily. Two weeks from today is Trinity Sunday, and today's sermon looks ahead to that theme of the Trinity. The concept of the Trinity can be stated in the mathematical formula that  $1+1+1=1$ . God the Father or Creator *plus* God the Son or Redeemer *plus* God the Holy Spirit or Sustainer *equals* One God. Three persons in the Trinity, but one God. Three in one, and one in three.  $1+1+1=1$ .

The concept of the Trinity is implied in the New Testament but never actually spelled out. The word "trinity" is never used, but the three persons of the Trinity are mentioned together several times. For example, in the passage we read from Second Corinthians, Paul concludes that letter with the Trinitarian benediction that I use almost every Sunday: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you." And in the verses we read from the 14th chapter of John, Jesus refers to God, himself, and the Holy Spirit. Three persons, one God.  $1+1+1=1$ .

Two years ago the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) received a document entitled "The Trinity: God's Love Overflowing," and commended that document to the congregations for study and for use in worship. In that document, produced by the General Assembly's Office of Theology and Worship, we read: "...the mystery of the Trinity...speaks of God as holy, abundant, overflowing love....We meet God's threefold love in the astonishing goodness of the Holy One of Israel, in the costly grace given to us in Jesus Christ our Savior, and in the new life in communion that has come to us in the gift of the Comforter....We therefore confidently affirm that the doctrine of the Trinity is neither presumptuous speculation nor mathematical nonsense. About this the church must have no doubt: The doctrine of the Trinity proclaims to us the very heart of God, made known to us and to the world in the self-sacrificial love of Jesus Christ and poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit" ([www.pcusa.org/theologyandworship/worship/trinity.htm](http://www.pcusa.org/theologyandworship/worship/trinity.htm)).

Most theologians agree that the three persons of the Trinity are co-equal and co-eternal and that there is a mutuality between them and among them. But there has been less agreement on what to call them.

In recent years there has been a lot of discussion about the language that we use in naming the three persons of the Trinity. Many people are uncomfortable with always using only male language---Father---for the first person of the Trinity, partly because God is not male, and partly because there are both masculine and feminine images for God used in the Bible. Jesus called God *Abba*, which is an Aramaic word that perhaps can best be translated as *Daddy*. But Jesus also described God as a woman searching for a lost coin, and he described himself as a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wing. In the Old

Testament there are references to God as a mother giving birth, as a nursing mother, as a midwife, as a mother eagle, and as a mother bear, among others.

Our human language for God is always limited to metaphors and therefore can never express the totality of who God is. These metaphors part the curtain ever so slightly to give us a tiny glimpse of what God is like, but these metaphors do not limit or define God in any way.

“Father” is only one of many metaphors used in the Bible to describe what God is like; but by its constant and repeated use in worship, the metaphor “Father” has become literalized, for some people, as the way to refer to God. Some people, in fact, believe that God is Father, which comes dangerously close to making an idol of that metaphor.

John Calvin, the father of Presbyterianism, wrote in the 1500s that “Father” is not “more appropriate” in referring to God because God “has manifested himself to be both...Father and Mother” (*Commentary on Isaiah 46:3*, quoted in *The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing*).

Many people are turned off by the patriarchal message of picturing God exclusively as a father. This male image of God is especially problematic for women and men who have had abusive fathers. Presbyterians believe that God is neither male nor female. But if we use exclusively male language for God, we are communicating the idea that God is male. And if God is perceived as male, then men are seen to be in the image of God, but women are not. But the first chapter of Genesis tells us that both men and women are created in the image of God. God is neither male nor female, because God is a spirit.

I commend North Church for the long history you have had of using language for God that is not gender-specific. Going back to the time of David McFarlane, your congregation, your staff, and almost all of your pastors have been committed to using “inclusive language” for people---that is, language that includes all people---and “expansive language” for God---that is, language that expands our use of the biblical metaphors in reference to God. (And incidentally, it was when David McFarlane attended a Presbyterian Women’s churchwide gathering at Purdue in the 1980s that he became sensitized to the need to use inclusive language. Thank you, PW!)

The biblical writers use many different metaphors to describe God, including father and mother; therefore, I believe that we also should utilize a wide variety of biblical metaphors for the triune God. As the document “The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing” states: “We need not insist on the exclusive use of the classic language [of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit], lest we quench the Spirit and even foster idolatry. Instead, we may cultivate a responsible Trinitarian imagination and vocabulary that bears witness in different ways to the one Triune God known to us from Scripture...Faithfulness to the gospel of the Triune God frees us to honor and continue to use classic ways of speaking even as it frees us to adopt new images and names of the same Triune God.”

Some new and “freshly imaginative ways” to name the Trinity are included in this document on the Trinity. I’ll quote just a few of them. They are all based on Scripture. Instead of saying “Father, Son, Holy Spirit,” we could say:

- “Rainbow of Promise, Ark of Salvation, Dove of Peace,” or
- “Speaker, Word, Breath,” or
- “Overflowing Font, Living Water, Flowing River,” or
- “Compassionate Mother, Beloved Child, Life-giving Womb,” or
- “Rock, Cornerstone, Temple,” or
- “Giver, Gift, Giving.”

In his book entitled *What Language Shall I Borrow?* Reformed theologian and hymn-writer Brian Wren suggests naming the three persons of the Trinity: Lover, Beloved, Mutual Friend. And he wrote a hymn entitled “How Wonderful the Three-in-One”:

“How wonderful the Three-in-One,  
whose energies of dancing light  
are undivided, pure and good,  
communing love in shared delight.

Before the flow of dawn and dark,  
Creation’s Lover dreamed of earth,  
and with a caring deep and wise,  
all things conceived and brought to birth.

The Lover’s own Beloved, in time,  
between a cradle and a cross,  
at home in flesh, gave love and life  
to heal our brokenness and loss.

Their Mutual Friend all life sustains  
with greening power and loving care,  
and calls us, born again by grace,  
in Love’s communing life to share.

How wonderful the Living God:  
Divine Beloved, Empow’ring Friend,  
Eternal Lover, Three-in-One,  
our hope’s beginning, way and end.”

Brian Wren, *What Language Shall I Borrow?*  
Crossroad Publishing Co, 1989, p. 215

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