

Biblical Numerology

Today is Trinity Sunday. It is always the first Sunday following Pentecost and is the only Sunday in the Christian church year that commemorates a doctrine rather than a person or an event recorded in Scripture. On Trinity Sunday we are called to remember the eternal God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Trinity is one of the most fascinating—and controversial of Christian teachings. The term, Trinity, is actually never mentioned in scripture. The Trinity is always described as a mystery—which it most definitely is, but it is not a mystery in the sense of being a riddle or puzzle which is to be solved. The Trinity is a reality above our human comprehension but one that we try to grasp yet ultimately cannot. It is a reality that we must come to know and experience through worship, through our symbols and metaphors, and most importantly through our faith. Essentially the Trinity is the belief that God is one in essence, but has been revealed to us in three persons. Therefore, we as Christians believe that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are somehow distinct from one another, BUT are not divided—even presenting as three persons they are completely united in will and essence. There are many analogies given as illustrations or images, but they all fall short because above all they are human attempts to categorize the One who created us. One of the oldest came from the third century when the leaders of the faith looked at the Scriptures and tried to explain God who created, Jesus who spoke to the Father who reigned in heaven who spoke of being sent by him and the Holy Spirit which came to guide believers after the risen Christ ascended. This analogy compared God the Father to light itself, Jesus Christ as the Son who illuminates, and the Holy Spirit as the warmth felt from the light. I rather like that one more than the more recent ones using the three leaves of a clover. What appeals to me about the light imagery is that it seems to come closest to the experience of God as witnessed to in Scriptures. This imagery is based on the relational nature of the witness from Scripture—It seems that the heart of the matter being revealed about God's self is about relationships and community. If you look at the light analogy in terms of the properties of light it is obvious that we can name them individually. Light is illuminating and light gives warmth. But these properties cannot be separated in experience. The metaphor which Augustine used is also based on relationship—The Father is the lover, the Son is the beloved and the Holy Spirit is the love shared between Father and Son, so love becomes the center of the metaphor and the relationship. Those of us raised within the Christian tradition probably just accept the concept of the Trinity without trying to dissect it—the repetition of the phrase Father, Son and Holy Spirit is so familiar we never wonder about it or question it. It is only when we come into contact with others who do not share this history that we are challenged to think about this understanding of God as Triune. These challenges in our interconnected world may come from those who are un-churched or from those of a different faith tradition. So although we will never be able to penetrate the mystery of the Trinity, we can seek to understand the importance of the divine relationship inherent that is revealed—God is relational within God's central essence which is love and because of that overflowing love—creation happened. God desires to be in relationship with what God has created. God also desires us to live in community with one another. It is apparent from Scripture that you cannot even begin to talk about God without considering relationships—community—living together in love. This is an

important truth which is found over and over again throughout Scripture through God's actions; found through God's instructions about living together as given at Mount Sinai and the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. The question becomes why does God choose to reveal God's self in this way? There are many numbers which are lifted up throughout Scripture. The appearance of these numbers in a passage is an indication of some important relationship in God's design for the world. Biblical numerology is fascinating. Many of these numbers are familiar—the number twelve for the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve disciples both of which are present in Revelation as both the twelve elders of the tribes and the twelve Apostles are present at the throne. The number forty appears in Noah's story, in the years of the Israelites wilderness journey and the days Jesus spent in the wilderness being tempted before beginning his ministry. There are other numbers which carried more meaning in their context, like the 153 fish caught in the disciple's net when in John's gospel the risen Jesus told them to cast it out on the other side of the boat. There were 153 known lands and ethnic groups at that time—Jesus had called them to be fishers of people—of all people. So when we encounter numbers in our text we should take note; should consider—should ponder what significance they have. So of course, when it comes to thinking about the Trinity; about God's revelation of God's self as three persons in the way Scripture tells us we need to consider how this numerical representation may help us understand and experience God. Three is a particularly intriguing number, especially when it comes to perceptions and assumptions about relationships. Think about it. Three is an odd number. And we are not usually comfortable with odd numbers. Our world seems to operate in, to prefer even numbers. There are four sides to a table. We tend to think that two children, one of each gender, complete a family unit. We like things to be paired. Even numbers seems to secure a certain sense of order and predictability that we expect from numbers. There is the expression about what happens when adding in the odd number to a group. That odd person becomes the odd person out. When the number is odd all of a sudden prospected patterns of behavior, anticipated actions of relational dynamics are offset. The interactions become unclear. When you have three, there enters a disquieting disequilibrium in a relationship: an apparent lack of control. When you have three involved the dynamics change. Three is harder. Even numbers promote pairs. When there are three frequently someone is left out because two seem to get along better with each other. When there are three you are forced to share a multiple sided conversation, to be attentive to another besides the one right in front of you. You have to listen to more than one person—perhaps even at the same time. You have to adjudicate feelings and responses and reactions that have doubled. That is both the problem and the promise of three. Yet God chose to express God's self with three, in three and through three. This says something about God's nature. It says something about how we should view the Trinity. Perhaps God likes disequilibrium. Maybe God thinks that is what relationships are all about. Maybe God embraces and invites imbalance. Maybe this is essential to God's character. We are awfully accomplished at focusing on what's in front of us—of dealing one on one because it is a lot simpler than one on two. One on two takes more work on our part. In the texts before us this morning we can ponder with Nicodemus how difficult it is to understand a new way of understanding. When Nicodemus comes to Jesus he comes in secret because he has heard many things of this man and the signs that indicate that he comes from God. He is curious, but

despite the signs, Jesus' words, his teachings depart from what Nicodemus has been taught about God and God's special relationship with those of the Jewish tradition. Nicodemus is a believer in God, but does not comprehend Jesus' identity. What Jesus is doing is not what Nicodemus knows and understands. It is not based on the connection to Abraham and the temple's teachings. When Jesus tells him that he must be born again, he is inviting Nicodemus to imagine a different way of relating to God and to others. Nicodemus needs to have a new way of looking at the world and others. The issue there is not conversion from unfaith to faith, but from one kind of faith, a faith in one's ancestors to another faith; a faith in Jesus recognizing Jesus' identity and authority. But Nicodemus misunderstands the invitation—he does not see the vision and is focused on the idea of literally returning to the womb to be physically born again. What Jesus was speaking of is the gift of new life, renewed hope and fresh beginnings when one quits looking at the world for guidance and seeks guidance from God—from above—from the Spirit. This invitation leads to a relationship with God which includes the world—a sense of ethics and of community. In this text we see Jesus as the Son speaking of the Father who sent him and the Spirit which brings new life: a very Trinitarian text. What is not quite so obvious is the presence of three in the Isaiah passage. Isaiah in receiving this call has to contend with God who is so holy that his first response is fear. But this call is not just about Isaiah and God, but is also about Isaiah and his sending to God's people. Isaiah has to contend with God, God's people, and himself. That's a lot more difficult than if Isaiah as prophet just had to deal with God. Or if he just had to deal with God's people. But there are three in this relationship. It seems that God's self-revelation is a commitment to the necessity of three. We need to not only worship the wholeness of the Trinity through its confessional status, but we need to acknowledge its complications: it is an expression of God's nature that is secured but surprising; known but intangible; revealed but complex. The Trinity is a mystery we cannot solve or adequately explain, but we can experience God in all three of God's revealed persons: Creator of new life, redeemer of life and sustainer of life.