

THE PICTURE OF GOD

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So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27)

Perhaps you know the story of the little girl who decided that she would draw a picture of God. She obtained the biggest piece of paper that she could find, because God was the biggest subject of all. Then she brought out her box of crayons, complete with 64 colors and its own crayon sharpener. With all this in hand she began her task. Sometime later her father came home. He noticed her busy at work with her crayons, and he asked what she was drawing. "I'm drawing a picture of God," said the little girl. "But sweetheart, nobody knows what God looks like," said the father. "Well," replied the little girl without so much as a pause in her coloring, "they'll know when I'm done!"

Today is Trinity Sunday. The doctrine of the Trinity is the church's picture of God. It dates from the fourth century, when the early church was rent asunder by heresy and schism. At issue was the nature of God. Thus it became necessary for the greatest and most faithful thinkers to draw the Christian picture of God. When they finally put away their theological crayons, the picture they held up for the world to see is what we know as the doctrine of the Trinity. What does it look like? Well, the Trinitarian picture of God isn't a snapshot or a drawing or a painting. The Trinity is a word picture of God, using ancient colors and philosophical concepts. It states that the one living and true God exists in three Persons who are all of the same Substance. The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God. Yet they are not three gods, but One God. God is "three in one" and "one in three" we say. And it's right about now – right at this moment on Trinity Sunday every year – when the eyes of churchgoers glaze over, and your minds wander to a galaxy far, far away. The Trinity strikes many as just a needless tangle of talk.

When I was growing up I sang in the boys' choir of our church. A frequent hymn was the one that began our service this morning: *I bind unto myself today*. It was a favorite, yet whenever we came to the line that described God as "the Three in One, and One in Three," for the life of me I could not understand what on earth it might mean. I finally settled on the only answer that my ten-year old brain could devise. It must be, I concluded, that some hymn writers would run out of things to say, but still have notes of music to fill with words. So what they would do is simply make up "filler phrases" to complete the tune. A filler phrase could be completely nonsensical, just so long as it matched the notes and completed the rhyme. Fill up the notes. Finish the rhyme. I couldn't imagine the Trinitarian words having any other meaning or relevance, whatsoever.

The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God; yet they are not three gods but one God. What about this picture of God? Does it have meaning that is accessible to the average person? Indeed it does. The Trinity, in fact, speaks directly to your life and mine because it arises out of our experience of God. All Christian doctrine, no matter how obscure, begins with Christian experience. God gives us an experience or an encounter or a revelation of Himself. Then we sit down and reflect on that experience in words, in music, and in pictures. Christian doctrine, including the Trinity, is a reflection on our common experiences of God throughout the ages.

So the question we might ask in approaching the Trinity is simply this: what has been your experience of God? All of us have experienced God, whether we know it or not. Perhaps for you

it begins with God the Father: God the Almighty, God in the First Person of the Trinity. We experience God as much, much greater than we are: one so powerful as to be the creator of the stable earth, the deep salt sea, the universe around us, and all things visible and invisible. The beauty and mind of the creation simply cannot be uncaused. Until the days of Jesus, people had always known of, or at least suspected the existence of God the Father, the First Person of the Trinity. But then along came Jesus, and the impact of his life, death, and resurrection on people was such that they were certain God himself had visited them in this individual. He was God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, of one Being with the Father. His essence and substance, his thoughts and feelings were exactly those of God. God was knowable through Jesus, and no words of praise were too high for him.

It didn't end there. After Jesus came the Day of Pentecost, when God's Holy Spirit visited people, and filled them with such new life that they could only conclude this was yet a third unique visitation of divinity. That same Spirit of God, which is the Spirit of Christ, visits us still today. So which is God? Or are all three God? But if all three are God, how could God be One, as Jesus and Moses and the prophets had taught? And, to put the whole mystery into the mouth of a Sunday School child I once knew: If Jesus was really God, then who was in charge of heaven while Jesus was here? Perhaps now you are beginning to see why the early church Fathers had to spell out the mystery, and draw us a picture of God.

Why should we want to spell out a picture of God? Why should we want to know God? Why would a child want to know his or her parents? We want to know who God is so that we can know who we are. So let's look at this Trinity Sunday picture of God. The little girl was right when she chose the largest piece of paper she could find to draw her picture of God. The early church fathers also knew that God was the biggest subject of all, so they composed their word picture on a vast canvass – not so much in size but in terms of its complexity. The nature of God is so vast that we can only stand back and focus on small sections of it at a time. God's nature is like an enormous painting on the wall of a gallery that is too small for us to back up far enough and take in the whole thing. The universe itself is a gallery that is too small for mortal eyes to take in all of God. You can't see timelessness from within time. But let's try for a moment. Let's imagine that the little girl has finished her drawing, and that what she has done with crayons is a perfect representation of what the early church Fathers did with words. As we step back as far as we can, and take in as much as we are able, what do we see?

Allow me to point out a few small pieces of this immense canvass. If you look closely you will notice that the little girl has managed to draw into her picture of God a freedom from the limitations of time and space. Today's Old Testament reading was supposed to include all seven days of the creation story. When I saw the length of it, I had mercy on you and we time-traveled straight to Day Six. Suffice to say, playing fast and loose with the boundaries of time isn't for us mortals. Though we are pressed and pulled to be in more than one place *at the same time*, we cannot disobey the laws of physics. Try as we might, being two places at once is impossible, thus we are unable to be present with people as we desire. But Genesis affirms that God is the author of time and space, and completely free to transcend these parameters. God existed before *the beginning*. God could be fully present in Jesus, and fully present in heaven, *both at the same time!* Our minds go on overload when we try to conceive of an existence outside the limits of time and space. But such freedom is what the doctrine of the Trinity ascribes to God.

What else can we see? Way over on another section of the canvass, you will notice that the little girl has colored the presence of perfect community into her picture of God's nature. Another way of saying the same thing is: she has erased from her picture all traces of loneliness and isolation. God's life is one of eternal fellowship and companionship. In our culture, we glorify the rugged individual who depends on no one. On the world stage, we see historic alliances under

threat: NATO, the European Union, even the Anglican Communion. “Let’s go it alone; let’s walk apart from each other,” seems to be the spirit of our age. But for the Triune God, dependence and fellowship are at the heart of the divine nature. Within God is a circle of love. The three members of the Trinity have eternally depended on and loved each other. God has never been alone. We are not meant to be alone. So the best analogy for the Trinity is caring for and loving another person, and having such love returned with an equal intensity. Being present for others, and having presence returned creates a wonderful, living picture of the Trinity, far better than equilateral triangles and three-leaf clovers.

Here is one more section to notice on the vast canvass the little girl has drawn of God. You will see that she has managed to draw humanity into her picture. She has connected human life with God’s life – not by projecting ourselves onto God, but rather, showing that God projected his image onto us. *God created humankind in his image*, affirms the writer of Genesis. As men and women, we each reflect an incomplete piece of God’s image – but a piece, nonetheless. Each of us is a partial reflection of God’s image. What is more, God wants to draw us completely into the circle of love that is himself, and give us a share in the life he enjoys. God wants us to share in his eternal life of perfect love and fellowship. *Baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit* commands Jesus in today’s Gospel from Matthew (28:16-20).

There you have three partial observations of the little girl’s Trinity Sunday picture of God: timelessness, perfect love, and humanity. She’s done! Do we know now what God looks like? With all due respect to the artist, I think it’s safe to say that we still have a ways to go in comprehending the mystery of God. So think not that our Trinitarian language is nonsensical “filler phrases” spoken for no other purpose than wasting your time. We haven’t run out of things to say. On the contrary, we have far too much to say, far too many rhymes to complete, and far too much to comprehend of God than any one lifetime can accomplish.

One of the greatest thinkers and theologians the church has ever known was St. Augustine of Hippo. In the closing lines of his massive work, The City of God, Augustine dared jump ahead to the day when finally we would understand, when finally we would meet God face to face. Anticipating what he called the “eighth day” of creation, he wrote:

There we shall be still and see; we shall see and we shall love; we shall love and we shall praise. Behold, what will be in the end, without end! For what is our end but to reach that kingdom which has no end?

For now, we see through a glass darkly. Now we see through doctrines, Word, Sacraments, art, music, poetry, science. But on the eighth day of creation we shall see face-to-face him who is Father, Son, and Holy Ghost: one God, world without end.

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