

## IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

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Grace Church in New York  
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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)*

Leo Tolstoy was a 19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> century Russian author who is widely acclaimed to be one of the greatest writers of all time. Tolstoy is perhaps best known for his novels *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*. But in 1886 he published a short story entitled *The Three Hermits*. The story goes that a bishop on a sea voyage comes upon a small island where three elderly hermits live alone, praying for the salvation of their souls and for the souls of others. The bishop, believing it is his calling to teach the Christian faith, persuades the ship's captain to stop so he can meet the hermits and instruct them.

Once ashore he finds the three ancient, godly men, but quickly realizes that their understanding of Christian doctrine is rather inadequate, even heretical. When the bishop asks them how they pray, one of the hermits replies, "We pray like this: 'Three are ye, three are we, have mercy upon us!'" Then all three of them raise their eyes to heaven and repeat, "Three are ye, three are we, have mercy upon us!" The bishop smiles at their childlike prayer, saying, "Obviously, you've heard something about the Holy Trinity, but you don't pray correctly." So the bishop spends the rest of the day painstakingly teaching them to pray the Our Father. They are not quick to catch on, but finally by sunset, when they can recite the prayer from start to finish, the bishop departs.

Back on the ship and out to sea the bishop thinks to himself how pleased the old men were to learn the Lord's Prayer. Indeed, he thanks God for having sent him there to teach and help such godly men. What a good thing he accomplished in correcting their prayers. He leans back in his deck chair secure in the knowledge of a job well done.

Today is Trinity Sunday. Today is a high feast on the church calendar when preachers typically sail into port (or climb into pulpits, as the case may be) and dare to play the role of the bishop in Tolstoy's story of the three hermits. The goal is to celebrate the doctrine of the Trinity, and perhaps teach the Christian faith, and if need be even correct any erroneous notions you may be harboring about the nature of God. It's a tough assignment for many reasons, not the least of which is that the Trinity is incomprehensible. The doctrine arises straight out of Scripture and experience, and 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. The Mystery beyond us is God. The Mystery among us is God. The Mystery within us is God. Yet they are not three mysteries or three gods, but One God. God is "three in one" and "one in three" as we sing in many hymns and anthems. Or, as the old hermits would pray, "Three are ye, three are ye, have mercy upon us."

Have I made myself clear? Is your understanding of God now sufficiently Trinitarian so that I may climb down from the pulpit and sail away? Of course it isn't, and neither is mine, so it may grieve you to know that I don't think we're done. Therefore, let's plunge into the Trinity in hopes that we can untangle and understand it. "But wait," you say. In a time of severe national crisis, the likes of which we haven't seen in decades, isn't trotting out a musty old doctrine filled with ancient philosophical concepts completely tone deaf to the needs of the world? It could be. Or perhaps the doctrine of the Trinity contains a message that may be exactly what we need to hear. Allow me to tease out just two – not even three implications of the Trinity that may be vital for us today.

Oftentimes people give up on the Trinity, thinking that it is some sort of numbers game involving fuzzy, divine math. But the Trinity is only about math insofar as math is one expression of God's mind. The Trinity is essentially a statement about God's interior life. We believe that God has revealed to humankind certain things about his nature. God has pulled back the curtain to disclose aspects of his character. What are God's thoughts and feelings? What is God's personality and disposition? Kallistos Ware is an Eastern Orthodox bishop and theologian in England, and of the Trinity he writes: "*The Christian God is not just a unit but a union, not just unity but community. There is in God something analogous to 'society.'*"<sup>1</sup> What we find deep in the heart of God is community, even society. Mind you now, it's not that God just likes these things. God is these things. The Father, Son, and Spirit enjoy an eternal relationship of self-giving, mutual love. A popular and indeed Biblical way of expressing the idea is, "God is love." God has never been lonely. "In him there is no darkness at all," is how the refrain of one hymn puts it. So that's the first implication of the Trinity. Love, relationship, even society are central to God's being. They are part of God's image.

The second implication of the Trinity that I wish to tease out follows the first. We've heard in the Book Genesis that we are made in the image of God: *So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.* It follows then that in creating us, God's intension is for our life to reflect the divine life. God wants us to experience the love, and community, and society that the Father, Son, and Spirit eternally enjoy in heaven. On Trinity Sunday we often search for analogies or symbols for how three can be one, and one can be three: triangles, interlocking circles, three-leaf clovers. But the best analogy of the Trinity is simply the experience of caring for and loving another person, and having your love returned with an equal intensity. Being present for others, and having presence returned creates a wonderful, living picture of the Trinity. It is what God created us to know, and an expectation of love seems to be wired into our being. Indeed, some have said that we have a primal memory of perfect love. It is the way things ought to be for all people.

These days it is painfully clear that the way things ought to be is not the way things happen to be. One spiritual interpretation of the protests on the streets is the great frustration of the society of people on earth with our failure to reflect the society of God in heaven. We instinctively yearn for God's type of life, even expect it, but we fail to live out the nature of God in our doings with each other. The images we've seen over the past two weeks have ripped the veneer off any notion that all is well. They have exposed the sin of racism at the core of American society. We've seen the video of a white woman in Central Park calling the police on a black man who was bird-watching, and asked her to leash her dog. The woman urgently reported that an African American man was threatening her life, when nothing of the sort was happening. We've seen the photos of the Minneapolis police officer, with his knee on the neck of a black man who died from asphyxiation while pleading, "I can't breathe." We've seen the news footage of people with crowbars and hammers smashing storefront windows and looting, so that now the great avenues and neighborhoods of New York City are boarded up and strewn with broken glass. Most of the looted stores were indefinitely closed due to the pandemic, and already on life support.

Oh yes, let's not forget the pandemic. Today was supposed to be yet another big day at Grace Church: the finale of the choir season. Typically we would have had about 75 choristers in the chancel to close the service with John Rutter's, "The Lord bless you and keep you." Then we would have retired to the lawn of Huntington Close for the parish picnic, with burgers and beverages for all. It's yet one more ritual the coronavirus has taken from us. Thank God, Bix Flynn, the Optima of the Girls Choir, is here to sing the Rutter piece. I've been listening to her rehearse this week, and you're going to love it. But if you've been around Grace Church for a while, especially on this Sunday in years past, you're going to be haunted by the memory of what used to be, and what now seems nearly out of reach. The city of God is far from us.

Nevertheless, we do not lose heart. God does not lose heart. The resurrection of Jesus demonstrates to us that God will never give up on humanity, despite everything we do to frustrate

his loving purposes for us. All is not lost. An idea that I've shared with you in sermons past comes to us from Augustine of Hippo, who was one of the greatest theologians of the early church. In his majestic work, *On the Trinity*, Augustine set forth an interesting notion that he called *Vestiges of the Trinity in the Created Order*, or, "Vestigia Trinitatis in Creatura." Augustine proposed that while sin mangles the image of God in us and in all of creation, even still traces of God's nature, or vestiges of the Trinity remain and occasionally shine forth. If indeed we are made in the image of God, then remnants of God's perfect Being – God's perfect Society – should still be discernable in human beings. That we love at all is a reflection, or a remnant of the fellowship that the Father, Son, and Spirit eternally enjoy in heaven. That people notice when the cities of Earth have strayed from the City of God and devote their lives to creating a more just and equitable nation is a vestige of the Trinity in the created order. Have the last two weeks on New York City been pleasant? No. Has all the behavior on the streets been admirable? Absolutely not. But that people care about shining a light on the dark aspects of our society is a vestige of the Trinity in the created order.

Personally, I like Augustine's idea of *Vestigia Trinitatis*. To say that the image of God has not been completely annihilated from our nature is to hold out respect for the dignity of every human being. It holds out hope that by God's grace we might be changed into the likeness of Christ, and even now see signs that the image of God is being restored in us. We can work on this. Go ahead, accuse me of Pelagianism, which is an early church heresy, but we can work on this. We can strengthen the vestige of the Trinity that remains in us. We can all take conscious, deliberate steps every day that cooperate with the Spirit of God, who is working within us that which is well-pleasing in his sight. The more we get ourselves out of the way, and allow the Spirit to express God's life through us, the more surprising deeds we may do in the Name of the Lord. And God knows, the world needs people these days who can walk on water.

Must you understand the Trinity in order to walk as a child of the light? No, the Trinity is not meant to be understood. The Trinity is meant to be lived out in your life and mine. At the beginning of the sermon I deliberately did not tell you the surprise ending of Leo Tolstoy's, *The Three Hermits*. If you recall, the bishop had just settled down on the deck of the ship as he sailed away from the island. As he gazes across the water, thinking about the hermits he sees a light off the stern of the ship, rapidly approaching them. What could it be? It was moving too fast to be another ship. In amazement he realizes that what he sees is the three hermits, all gleaming white, their grey beards shining, running across the water as only Christ could do, as if the sea were dry land.

The three hermits come alongside the ship and ask that it be stopped. Standing upon the water, hand-in-hand, they confess to the bishop that already they have forgotten how to pray as he had taught them. "As long as we kept repeating it, we remembered it, but when we stopped saying it for a while, a word dropped out, and now it's all fallen to pieces. We can remember nothing of it. Teach us again," they say. The bishop crosses himself, and with newfound humility replies, "Your own prayer will reach the Lord, O men of God. It is not for me to teach you. Pray for us sinners."

Tolstoy's story is a wonderful reminder that even if you don't understand the Trinity, you can still live it. Remember: *God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.* The prophet Isaiah (40:31) declared that those who trust in the Lord shall renew their strength. *They shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint.*

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<sup>1</sup> Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1990, p. 33.