

“Leaving Room for More”
Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; John 16:12-15
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Some of you have wondered whether Ian and Ali inherited their scientific gifts from their mother, since I am one of these people who interpret Holy matters using language skills more than scientific ones. How could I have had anything to do with children who grew up to be neuroscientists? Well, Dana is a historian by education who was not fond of math while I was supposed to be a mathematician or scientist.

As evidence of this gift, in my undergrad years I was one of twenty honors students who took an advanced course in calculus and analytical geometry, and one of only five who completed the course. One semester-long assignment was to provide a geometric proof for the problem of the Tower of Hanoi being solvable for up to $N=64$.

It is the puzzle that looks like a children’s game where there are three posts with discs sitting on top of each other on one post with the largest on the bottom and no larger disc on a smaller one. The task is to move the discs one at a time to other posts without putting a larger disc on a smaller one until all the discs are moved to a different post. The assignment was to prove this could be done for up to sixty-four discs.

I wrote a magnificent proof, at least I thought so, and the professor applauded my work, but one argument was flawed and thus the entire proof tumbled to the ground! So it goes with rational proofs. I still received a good grade. The primary purpose was to develop disciplined thinking, and I’m not sure anyone wrote a flawless proof, but logical arguments are like parts of a building - each part builds on the previous one, and if any single argument is flawed, it all comes tumbling down.

I make this observation today because the Trinity is not a concept to be explained or proven but rather a mystery to be experienced. This is not to say there haven’t been attempts to explain and prove this understanding of the Holy. Given my interest in disciplined thinking, I

have read volumes of well-designed arguments! But while shedding certain light, they all raise as many questions as they answer. As logical constructions, they all come tumbling to the ground.

Every line of a proof matters. Furthermore, the very idea that God is revealed in multiple ways and yet still One is a mystery that cannot be reduced to an argument or proof. It is why for some years when asked, “Do you believe in the Doctrine of the Holy Trinity?” I have replied, “No... but I do believe in the mystery of the Holy Trinity.”

So, where does this leave us? In part, with a calling to experience the Trinity, to experience God in three persons, not to try and make perfect sense of it. But to the extent that there is something to make sense of, perhaps it is to realize that there is ever more to God, to the Holy, and to life itself, than we can possibly know.

This is what Jesus says in the reading from John 16. It is part of what we call the “farewell discourse” in which Jesus says “good-bye” to his closest friends and seeks to prepare them for his absence. He has spoken of the Spirit many times before, but now he says, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth...”

He goes on to talk about the source of the Spirit’s wisdom, God whom he calls Father, and we catch a glimpse of the connectedness of all three persons of the Trinity, but while in other texts the Spirit is named Comforter and Advocate, here the Spirit is Teacher. The Spirit will guide Christ’s followers further in truth over time because there is ever more to know and we are never quite ready to hear some things.

The latter part we understand. In adolescence there are many things our parents, teachers, and other adults want to tell us that we aren’t ready to hear. I remember going on a college missions trip and working with high school students when their teacher asked us to tell them what they needed to know to stay out of trouble. I offered a few thoughts but also noted that there are things we have to learn for ourselves... and then pray we survive our mistakes!

Well, we don’t have to learn them for ourselves, we just insist on it, but the most irritating part of the great wisdom our elders want to

impart to us when we are young is that it almost all turns out to be true – like every decade of life seems to go by a little quicker!

But it's not just adolescents who are not ready to hear some things. Difficult medical news is hard to hear when we are older; we tend to close it out as long as we can. Information about change in the world, new insights from various branches of knowledge which threaten to overturn traditional beliefs and practices, other ways of thinking about ourselves, life, and perhaps even God... are we ready for any of this?

The God part is what Jesus is talking about primarily, who God is, what Jesus' mission has been, how the Spirit will continue this work. It's not that much of this is unbearable in the sense that a cancer diagnosis is unbearable. But it is more than we can hold in our minds, who God is involves more than we can hold in our minds, how God is at work in this world is more than we can hold in our minds.

Consider the first disciples. They think of God as a literal male human-like parent who is up there because heaven is up there. The earth is the flat center of the universe with Sheol below and the heavens above with God. They think the gospel is for all people, all Jewish people. It will take the better part of a century for the majority of the church to embrace the mission to the Gentiles. And they think illness is the result of sin. They have no concept of germ theory, though I can assure you that I do... I have become very familiar with some microbial life form the past week as my coughing and sneezing confirm!

But the point is their understanding limits their ability to receive new information about the character of God, the mission of Christ, and many practical aspects of life that bump up against theology. They can't bear hearing about a mission to Gentiles. They aren't ready to think about a world where the earth is not only not the flat of the center of the universe but simply one planet circling one sun in one galaxy which is part of one of countless universes. They think of all other faiths as being invalid, but all other faiths means the worship of Ba'al. They have no awareness of Eastern religions; Islam does not exist yet. Whatever God would have us to know about any of this they wouldn't understand.

But then, there are many things we still struggle to understand. It is the case in each new generation. There is always more to know about

things than we thought there was, and there are also new innovations that require ethical and theological reflection. Previous generations didn't consider the implications of stem cell research, Artificial Intelligence, or sexual identity. And space travel obviously never entered their minds!

We might assume some of these issues have nothing to do with what one thinks about God, but life is not that compartmentalized. Just ask Copernicus or Galileo or think about our shifting cosmology today. For some people, the discovery of other stars and universes simply enhances their belief in the Divine. How else could all of this exist? But for others it eliminates God from the realm of possibility. Why? Because we now have been up there in the heavens first through telescopes and then through spacecrafts, and wherever we have looked or gone, we haven't found God. At least that is what some conclude.

But, of course, this is due to a limited view of God. God is not just up there. God is right here - in us, with us, and working among us. Furthermore, God is not a wise old male human being, and white at that... these are just images that help some people attend to the One beyond all understanding. God is Holy, completely other, beyond human imagination, yet also intimate friend. To recognize God, we need to know this; we need perspective, understanding, and discernment.

So, how do we develop these capacities? By leaving room for more than we have previously understood, and by seeking the Spirit's guidance. Jesus says the Spirit comes to guide us in understanding, to point us toward truth, to help us recognize the Holy and how God is at work. This relates to the mission of the church and how we engage critical issues. We need the Spirit to guide us into these truths. But it also relates to how we see God. We need the Spirit's guidance here, and much of this comes though helping us view each person of the Trinity.

Part of God's character is revealed in the personhood of Father, Creator, Origin of Life. We see God throughout creation – in the stars, in the mountains, in the oceans, in wisteria and gardenias and crepe myrtles. We hear God in the rushing of a waterfall, in the roar of a lion, in the song of a mockingbird, and perhaps even the off-key voice of the

white throated sparrow... We can smell the Divine in ocean air, taste the Holy in fresh strawberries, sense God in every part of creation.

God is also revealed in Jesus the Christ, Immanuel, God Incarnate. We see God in Jesus' teachings about love and service, his actions in pursuit of justice and liberation, his suffering, death, and resurrection. We sense the Spirit of Christ working through his body, the church - in the joy of service, in the majesty of music, in the warmth of fellowship.

And we experience God every day as Spirit, Teacher, Guide, moving among us now, giving expression to feelings we have that are too profound for words, empowering the work of the church. If we are paying attention, we catch glimpses of the Spirit of God in the laughter of children, in simple act of kindness, in the courageous stand for justice of many in this time of so much maddening injustice. In fact, the Spirit of God is everywhere, in all things, a bit like the Force in *Star Wars*, but not just as impersonal energy, as personal Divinity. So, the Spirit not only guides us into truth, the Spirit is truth, the Spirit is God.

The concept of Trinity helps us attend many manifestations of the Divine, but there are other images of God in scripture that are helpful too. The reading from Proverbs talks about the Holy as Wisdom who is present at creation. Some equate Wisdom with Spirit, some do not, who knows? Is She a part of God, a gift from God, a co-creator like the Word? Lest we be startled by the feminine image, Hosea and Jesus use Motherly images for God. God is revealed in these ways too.

I'm not suggesting we move from belief in the Trinity to belief in God as revealed in five persons or an unlimited number of them. I'm saying that while we learn specific things about the character of God through each person of the Trinity, we also catch a glimpse of a more basic and equally critical reality, that God is ever more than we think. To equate God with any single image is idolatry. Whatever we think we understand about God, we need to leave for more.

Seventeenth-century English Separatist John Robinson once said that "God hath yet more light and truth to reveal from his holy word." We stand on solid ground with the faithful of all generations when we leave open the possibility of learning more.