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FOREST AND PUZZLE

Trinity Sunday. These two words, uttered from the pulpit, threaten a not insignificant segment of the American economy. Because it is estimated that approximately \$32 billion dollars are spent each year on pills, products and medical devices — to treat insomnia. The Trinity preached can make a dent in this.

Truth is, this doctrine should not put us to sleep, but should wake us up. For a few of the Western world's greatest philosophers and theologians, as well as poets and artists, the Trinity has been a guide, a destination, an inspiration, an aspiration to not only getting a glimpse into who God is — and some believe more than a glimpse — while almost always admitting, at some point, that this is a complex puzzle.

The Doctrine of the Trinity is not simply the product of men who had too much time on their hands and said, "Let's do something incomprehensible!" Well, maybe a little. Power and politics were also involved, always are —religious beliefs are firmly rooted on earth while pointing towards heaven— but what was being grappled with was this: In Scripture, humanity met God in three forms. One, as God the Father of the Hebrew Bible: who was Creator, Lord, Judge; Second, as God the Son: who lived among humans, the Word made Flesh; Third, as Holy Spirit: who filled us with new life.

So the problem was a matter of relationship. Did Father always know best, the other two only a supporting cast? And who, exactly, was Jesus? A Son of God, or God the Son? In the fourth century, the first two ecumenical councils of the Christian church gathered, and a Creed was born — at Nicea in 325, and, with slight amendment of words, at Constantinople in 381.

Almost 1,700 years later, this still is the statement of faith in most Christian traditions. The bottom line of a doctrine, or a creed, is simply this: It determines who is in, and who is out. Who is on my team, and who is the heretic? Funny thing is — the in/out part is exactly opposite of the meaning of the Doctrine of the Trinity.

Let me quote briefly from the Creed of Saint Athanasius, in case you're not yet asleep. This can be found on page 864 of the Book of Common Prayer and which, in some Anglican churches, is read on Trinity Sunday. Used by the Church since the sixth century, it summarizes the equality of the Three Persons of the Trinity, thus:

The Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one, the Glory equal, the Majesty co-eternal. And yet they are not three eternal, but one eternal. As also there are not three incomprehensibles, nor three uncreated, but one uncreated, and one incomprehensible.

I think my point is made. The bottom line is quite Episcopalian: an appreciation for paradox and synthesis. Eternal questions, not rigid answers.

Which is why theologians from Augustine — not ours, the other one — to Aquinas, to the liberation and feminist theologians of our times, have engaged Trinitarian doctrine because we wonder: How does God appear to God, and how does God appear to us — and is there a difference? In shaping an answer, that also shapes us, as persons, as church, as people in the world.

A puzzle, yes, but let us now try to put the pieces together.

At least some of us can. Full disclosure: I am spatially challenged. As a child, I was given a small jigsaw puzzle, of perhaps five or six pieces, and struggled to figure out which part fit into the other. My mother took notice, and no more puzzles came my way.

Until high school, something possessed me. I was in a bookstore and noticed a long wall filled with puzzles. Of beautiful nature scenes, of art reproductions; I even remember one of a pizza. And while that was tempting, I went with something I had never yet personally experienced: a lush forest, a Northeastern forest, of trees in full early summer leaf. I forgot I couldn't do this. I brought it home, and noticed that there were lots of pieces in the box. About 1,000, I think. Now think about this for a moment. What is the color of a summer forest? Green. All green. I had 1,000 green bits not much bigger than a fingernail awaiting transformation into a forest.

They would have to wait quite a while. After a month or so, I stopped after assembling all the borders — they had the straight edges, so this was the easier part — and about 15% or 20% of the middle. This was far better than I had done as a child, so I was pleased at my progress.

For some reason, the jigsaw followed me to college, where one day in conversation with a friend it came up that he sometimes did puzzles just to relax, and I said — again, I don't know what possessed me — Let's do it together!

“Straight edges first, right?” I said, very wise, ready to impress in this new relationship. He nodded, and I noticed that he was working about three times as fast as I was on this easy part; still, I was sort of keeping up. Then the awe and wonder began. As if he already held the forest in his hands, he rapidly, without hardly any hesitation, began snapping together the pieces. I continued fumbling. All I achieved was a pile of sad mis-fits connecting with nothing. Finally, I stopped and had to ask.

“Are you on drugs?”

Without lifting his eyes from the task at hand, he answered: “I was going to ask you the same thing.”

I don't know if we — okay, not “we” — completed the puzzle in a day, but not more than two or three. Even though mostly an observer, I felt a true sense of achievement, or at least a genuine appreciation of the beauty we — sort of — had made. It was as pretty as the picture on the box. At last, it was complete. “It's a real forest,” I blurted. He was a science student, logical, and by this point probably doubting my cognitive abilities. “It's a puzzle,” he said.

Which is exactly what even the greatest theologians have concluded after trying to explain the Trinity.

Augustine, even though his tome *On the Trinity* stretches for over 400 pages, concluded: “Among all the things I said about the supreme trinity. I dare not claim that any of them is worthy of this unimaginable mystery.” Aquinas, who after having a personal experience of God, summed up all of his writings in one word: “Straw.” Just a dried stalk of grain, nothing more.

And today’s favorite, the Athanasian Creed: “The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible.” Is this admitting defeat, or grasping many possibilities?

Could this be the possibility that the Trinity is not merely an exercise of God-thinking-for-those-with-too-much-time, but of God-acting-in-the-world-in-our-time? Of God sweeping us in, saying: Let’s do this together!

Could this be the possibility that we are one thousand fragments of a complex puzzle, mostly alike but still unique, reaching out to connect with neighbors, looking for that perfect fit?

Sometimes, the fumbling goes on and on, and in some blessed moments we effortlessly connect to become one substance. I expect that the three Persons of the Trinity do it with an eternal ease; for most of us, the puzzle remains a puzzle — but yet, we know what a forest is, we know we are part of it, we know it cannot become a complete picture without us, and we know that someone else has already done most of the work.

If the Christian image of God became an accepted doctrine of humanity, the effect upon the economy would be far greater than that of a cure for insomnia.

Imagine a community of ever-giving — and ever-receiving — love. Imagine a community focused not on personal self-fulfillment — spiritual or material — but on mutual care, mutual growth, mutual responsibility. Imagine a community where neither joy nor sorrow are ever experienced alone, but one always touching the other, your joy beginning with mine, your sorrow ending with mine. Imagine a community without a cast-off pile of mis-fits, the more complete pieces not knowing where to put them.

Such a community will be worth waking up to every morning, and will grant us peace every night.

This is a reality that is ours, when we let ourselves be possessed by the love of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

And the people say...