

Our God is a strange God. Now, I know how that sounds—it sounds strange to say that God is strange . . . but He is. He is strange because He is three . . . and yet, He is one. He is three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit . . . but only one God. Our God is Trinity, and that makes Him strange. This morning, I want us to consider that strangeness—really ponder how no other god is strange like our God.

The Gospel text we just heard a few moments ago comes from John. And if you know anything about John, John's got some of the most striking, overt, in-your-face teachings about the Holy Trinity. In John, Jesus says things like, "I and the Father are one" and "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." Imagine for a moment you are a Jew, standing there in front of Jesus—your religious creed is Deuteronomy 6:4, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one"—and Jesus lets something like that drop. It's hard to blame them for wanting to cast stones, isn't it! But today's Gospel text won't have it any other way—John chapter 3, Jesus is talking to Nicodemus, and He not only mentions God, but also God's Son, and even the Spirit. Our God is strange—He is Trinity: one God, three persons.

Now, on the one hand, there are some who find our God strange especially because He is one. When you consider the vast pantheons of old, they have hundreds, if not thousands, or if you're Hindu then even millions of deities. In the scheme of polytheism, it is strange to claim that God is one.

But, on the other hand, some think it's the very threeness of God that makes Him so strange. Monotheism, for some, isn't what sets God apart. Islam, for example, believes that God is one, yes, but then they just stop there. For them, to say that there's any kind of plurality of persons within that godhead is nothing short of blasphemy.

But today, Trinity Sunday, we remember that to deny the three persons of the one God is what constitutes as sacrilege. Don't be fooled by the popular notion that Muslims believe in the same God—God the Father—just minus the other two. To them, the fullness of the Trinity—Father, AND Son, AND Holy Spirit—has been revealed, yet they deny it. They deny the great three-in-one, and so they deny God Himself. A god without Jesus Christ at the center, after all, is a god without a heart. For all other monotheists, three persons-one God is just too strange.

So, how do we make sense of such an oxymoronic doctrine, a belief about God that sounds like an inherent contradiction? I mean, three in one? How can God be three when He is one? How can He be one when He is three? Well, honestly, I'm not sure we can make heads or tails of it—not really. But when we let Scripture interpret Scripture, we hear it say both that there's only one God, and also that He is three persons. Those two seemingly contradictory statements we hold in a delicate balance, and we call it the Holy Trinity. And the rest, as far as how that actually works, is a divine mystery. Add that to the list of questions you might have for God when you get to heaven someday.

But over the years, faithful to God's Word, the Church has put forth some helpful ways to think about this. The Church explains that the Trinity can be so bound up as one, because of its great love. "God is love," says John in his first epistle. And the Church compares such a bond of love in terms of marriage and family. Think for a moment about how the Bible teaches that within such a relationship, husband and wife are no longer two but become one. When their two fleshs get together, they literally are joined in the one flesh of a child. They might be three distinct persons—husband, wife, and son or daughter—but they are one family unit. A family portrait is one helpful way to describe the Trinity this side of heaven—but it still falls short.

You see, the close, intimate, uniform bond of the Holy Trinity goes far beyond that of the human family. But Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are so in sync that there's full partnership and cooperation in all things. To best understand this synchronization, the Church from early on came up with a Greek word, *perichoresis*. *Perichoresis* is used to describe the triune relationship between the three persons of the Godhead. It is the co-indwelling, co-inhering, and mutual interpenetration of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. A world-renowned theologian, Alister McGrath, writes that it "allows the individuality of the persons to be maintained, while insisting that each person shares in the life of the other two. An image often used to express this idea is that of a 'community of being,' in which each person, while maintaining its

distinctive identity, penetrates the others and is penetrated by them." But I'll put it even more simply than that—it's a dance.

If you've ever seen professional dancers, they dance as one, don't they? They are so in tandem that their movements are shared, flowing from one to the other and back again. It is difficult to tell where the one ends and another begins. They are a single indistinguishable unit, their every step in perfect unison. And as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit work jointly in seamless synergy—never at cross-purposes, but always banded together in love—it can be best described as a dance.

For a polytheist, that kind of harmony is strange—there's little unity when it comes to their gods. Rather, those deities are always fighting and vying for power. But for the traditional monotheist, such unanimity also sounds strange—because their god stands alone. For them, god is a loner, off by himself. He is not the very embodiment of love, a perfect partnership of persons bound up in one another—he remains in solitude. And so for all other religions, our God—the Holy Trinity—is definitely strange.

But, in all fairness, isn't He also strange even to us, those who believe in Him? After all, you and I, we've never seen anything like that before, have we? Instead, what do we see? Well, tell me if this isn't your daily experience: You turn on the news, you check your Facebook feed, and what is there but jabs between politicians yet again, yet one more suspect in custody, yet another offensive comment meant to divide. That's what we see—everywhere division. Even in the Church, where Jesus prays that we would be one even as God is one, we find schisms. And along with Jesus, I too pray that we here at Ascension would be one in all things or at least strive to be, but God forbid, if any of us talked long enough we'd probably find something to disagree about. We see division everywhere.

Perhaps worst of all, we even find a fault line between us and God. Separating you, getting in your way, what stands between you and Him? Could it be a challenging teaching in your church—you know what I'm talking about—and even though it's what the Bible says, do you still have trouble swallowing it? Division. You're a new creation, your mind's renewed by the Holy Spirit, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared for us to do beforehand, but when you look at your life do you find otherwise? Division. God's calling you to step out in faith, asking you to trust Him in some new venture, but are you instead pulling away in the opposite direction? Division. Division, division, division, that's what we know—all we know—so the Trinity is nothing short of strange to us.

And maybe right now, you feel the distance between you and your God. Maybe now that great divide has never felt so great. Here you are, and there's God—worlds apart. He seems somewhere else, anywhere else. And it's lonely without Him. After all, if this Trinity is strange, it's only because He is love. And now, no God means no love. What a sad, scary, uncertain place to be.

Friends, if that's where you find yourself today, let me paint for you a picture. Or rather, let me tell you about the one printed in your bulletin this morning. It's what the Eastern Church calls an icon. This one is by the Russian iconographer Andrei Rublev, and it dates back to the fifteenth century. It's a scaled down, stripped back, minimalized depiction of the story in Genesis 18, when Abraham hosted three mysterious visitors in his tent. For Rublev, however, it was clear who those three persons were.

Make no mistake though—this isn't a literal portrait of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. After all, any illustration of God apart from how He's openly revealed Himself is forbidden in the First Commandment. Instead, what we have here is a symbolic portrait of their relationship one to another. Notice how they all three face each other, and the postures of the three persons imply a circle, showing their unity. It's like they're joined together in a swirling dance, a fluid *perichoresis*. Perhaps now you're nodding your head, *Okay, now I see it—there's our strange God*.

But that's not it—that's not even the strangest part. There's one more thing I want to point out to you—maybe today the most important thing. Notice how the circle isn't closed off. Nobody has their back turned to you, the viewer. Rather, their bodies open up to include you in the circle, don't they? We don't see Abraham anywhere playing the part of host anymore, but instead it's the Holy Trinity graciously hosting you. It's like God's inviting you to pull up a chair, like

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the great-three-in-one has room for one more. And with that, do you now see your strange God extend His strange love to you?

Don't you see, there's no division between you and our Triune God—there can't be! Not when our God has come down and stood in that gap Himself. Not when, in the flesh of Jesus, God has filled that void. Not when He has made reconciliation, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Not when He tears down walls like that temple curtain, not when He builds bridges like His cross. No, in all that, He puts a stop to division once and for all—"Tetelestai," He says. "It is finished." No more!

Rublev set out to depict our strange God's even stranger love for you. But I think Jesus paints the best picture with His words this morning. In the Gospel Reading, Jesus illustrates what really happened on the day you were baptized—it wasn't what it looked like. It wasn't just a family gathering around the baptismal font, just some religious ritual, or just some water. But Jesus says what happened there was a miracle, a birth was taking place. You had already been born, yes, to an earthly set of parents. But now you were being born of the Spirit, delivered into the very arms of God's family. The Holy Trinity welcomed you to your new heavenly home. And Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, they opened up their circle for you, to join them in their bond of love.

Our God is a strange God. But I think you agree He is good-strange. Our lives blending together with Him in a beautiful, unified, harmonious perichoresis. So, right now or whenever He takes you by the hand and asks, "Shall we dance?" Let's never sit one out, but always and forever say, "We shall."