

Sermon for Sunday, June 6, 1971 by Andrew A. Jumper, Pastor
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"GOD'S HOLY ARITHMETIC"

Romans 8:1-11

Text: "But you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if the Spirit of God really dwells in you." Romans 8:9

One of the great doctrines of the Christian Church throughout the centuries has been the doctrine of the Trinity. Briefly, this doctrine has affirmed that there are three persons in the Godhead: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit--yet, at the same time God is one. To try to understand God's holy arithmetic from a logical, human standpoint is utterly impossible. The human mind cannot conceive of threeness and oneness--plurality and singularity--at the same time.

Now, no theologian in his right mind would have ever thought up a doctrine like that! In the first place, the idea never would have occurred to him, and in the second place, even if it had, he would not have used such an absurd idea because he never would be able adequately to explain it to anyone! The church has enough problems without her theologians thinking up impossible doctrines! No, the doctrine of the Trinity grew out of the church's experience of God. The doctrine of the Trinity was simply the church trying to say in a systematic way how it had experienced God. In that sense, then, the doctrine of the Trinity is a doctrine of Christian experience. The church developed the doctrine of the Trinity because it knew God as Father, it knew him as Son, and it knew him as indwelling Holy Spirit. Yet, at the same time, it knew that this was one and the same God.

Now how in the world do you explain to someone that God is three yet one? Quite frankly, the doctrine of the Trinity raises some dreadfully hard questions and most of them we cannot answer. But we do not believe this doctrine because it is rational or logical, or even because it makes sense. No, we believe this doctrine because this is the witness of the Bible and it is precisely how we experience God. We believe this doctrine because in our own lives we discover that this is exactly how we encounter God.

Last Sunday was Pentecost. It marked the beginning of the third major season of the Church year. The first season was God the Father, the second was God the Son, and Pentecost began the season of God the Holy Spirit. So, historically, the first Sunday after Pentecost has been celebrated as Trinity Sunday because at Pentecost God has revealed himself fully and completely not only as Father and Son, but also as Holy Spirit. This season of God the Holy Spirit will last until the first Sunday in October when we begin the cycle again with the Season of God the Father.

Now, Christian doctrine is of little value except to theologians unless it has some practical value and some practical meaning to the average layman. You might very well ask this morning what difference it makes to you whether we have three Gods or one.

Notice in the first place that God the Father means God above us--a God who plays the same fatherly role in human history that a human father plays in his family. He is God above us whose name the Hebrew did not ever dare to pronounce, whom Barth has called the Wholly Other. He is the Holy One of Israel who is awesome in his righteousness and justice, who is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable.

In his book Moby Dick, Herman Melville tells us of the savage Tashtego.

Tashtego carried his little wooden god around in his sea bag wherever he went. Every night before going to bed he would take his fat, ugly little god out. There, for a brief moment of reverence, he would bow before the god, bumping his head in humility before the god as he worshipped. Then, his worship over, he would unceremoniously and--I might add!--somewhat disrespectfully take his god by the head and stow him away in his duffel bag, not to be touched until the following night.

But the God of the Bible cannot be contained in a seabag. No he is a God who is the creator of heaven and earth; it is He who sets the stars in course, who controls the universe, who guides the destiny of all things toward that divine purpose for which he created them. And though sinful man engage in dreadful war, though he be ravaged by death and pestilence and sorrow, still he can take heart in the knowledge that there is a God above us, a God who is sovereign over all creation and ultimately over the affairs of men. What a blessed assurance it is to know that time, that history, that we ourselves are ultimately in the hands of an Almighty God who is far above and beyond what we can even imagine--a God above us who is like a father.

Then I would have you observe in the second place that the doctrine of the Trinity not only means God above us, it also means God the Son--God for us. If you will study the various religions of the world you will discover that they have one thing in common. Man somehow--by his good deeds, his fine acts, his holy life--must win the approval or buy the approbation of his god in order to be saved. But move over into the New Testament and see what a different atmosphere you breathe! God is not against us, demanding what we cannot give; God is for us, doing for us what we could not do for ourselves.

You simply cannot explain the birth of Jesus and his death on the cross in any terms but God for us, doing for us on Calvary what we could not do for ourselves. It is a theme that runs throughout the whole of the New Testament for, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself..." or again, "For God so loved the world he gave his only begotten Son...", or again, "For God sent not his son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved." You can search the dusty books of the religions of man but only in Christianity will you find this startling, this unexpected, this glorious concept of God for us. Yes, God loves us, he is for us, and it makes all the difference in the world. See how it works!

Joan and Timothy married in middle life and moved into a home in New Jersey. They began to fix the extra bedroom up for a nursery--a sort of standing prayer that God would send them a child. At last, when no child came, they tried to adopt a little girl. The director of the orphanage called one day and said, "We have a little girl named Dorothy. I might as well warn you in advance, she doesn't look like much. Would you and your husband take a sick child?" At the orphanage Joan found Dorothy to be a thin, pale, and weak little creature. Her child's expression was a complete blank, her eyes lack luster and dull. Unmoving she sat in a chair and did not turn even when her name was called. Although three years old, she had never learned to say even one word. She ate very little. The doctors were mystified and did not know what was wrong with her. Joan called Timothy and told him the sad details of the forlorn little child. When she finished, he said to her, "Yes, dear. Catch the bus and come on home. I'll be there to meet you--and Dorothy."

Well, Dorothy became the happy chatter-box, the tomboy of the neighborhood. Timothy tells it this way, "If there was anything physically wrong with her the doctors would have found it. We just brought her home and loved her--and it made all the difference in the world." That's what God the Son means--it means God for us,

God loving us, God forgiving us, God caring for us--and it makes all the difference in the world.

We don't need so much to be told what to do--we know what to do and cannot do it. We don't need so much to be told what to be--we know what to be and cannot be it. What we do need is to know that there is Someone for us--someone who loves us, who forgives us, who comes to help us when we cannot help ourselves. Surely the doctrine of the Trinity means this--God taking our sins upon himself, God dying in our place, indeed, God for us.

Then I would have you notice in the third place that the doctrine of the Trinity means not only God above us, and God for us, it also means supremely God with us. And is not this what we really need? We do not need a God like the Greek gods atop some remote Mt. Olympus. We do not need a God out of sight in some inaccessible heaven. No, we need a God who comes to meet us in the middle of life, of where we live. We need a God who, in the time of need, in time of trouble, in time of human temptation, in time of desperate sorrow, in time of crushing pain, in time of great extremity is a God who is with us. We need a God like the Psalmist had who wrote, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me."

Let me tell you the story of Sara Flower Adams who, in the midst of tragedy and disappointment, found that God was with her. She was a young girl who wanted to win fame and fortune on the stage. She had beauty and talent and she was willing to work hard to achieve her goals. At long last Sara Adams got her big break and she proved to be a success in her very first play. By the time she was twenty-five the critics widely acclaimed her performance in rehearsals for her opening in Lady MacBeth. Yet, on the very night of the opening, Sara Adams was struck down with an incurable illness and the curtain rang down on her career. In her last days as she lay despondent and uncaring, her minister came to see her. Taking her hand in his, he told her that in spite of her illness and disappointment that here, in this terrible experience, she would find God's presence with her if she would open her heart and turn to him. Sara Adams did not live long after that, yet as she did walk through the valley of the shadow of death, she discovered God to be with her and it was enough. Before her death she expressed her faith in a little poem that has since been put to music. It is a hymn all of us have sung and it goes like this: "Nearer, my God to Thee, Nearer to Thee! E'en though it be a cross, That raiseth me, Still all my songs shall be, Nearer, My God, to Thee...." Surely the doctrine of the Trinity means this--God with us, nearer than ever before.

The doctrine of the Trinity is God's Holy Arithmetic. From a logical, rational, human point of view, it is a doctrine that makes no sense. Yet, in our lives, in our human experience, we discover that God's holy arithmetic begins to add up. It adds up because in life we discover Him to be God above us--the Alpha and the Omega--the beginning and the end, the sovereign ruler over human history and the destiny of men. We discover him to be God for us--for us so much that he takes our place and dies our death in a love that makes all the difference in the world. We know him as God with us--with us even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Whatever life brings, whatever our sorrow or disappointment or pain or need, he is with us and we can sing with joyful gratitude, "Nearer my God to Thee..."