

Sermon for Sunday, June 5, 1977, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Senior Pastor
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"HOW GOD'S BAD MATH ADDS UP"

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. Any one who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him."

Romans 8:9

To talk about one in three or three in one is bad math. It is bad math because plurality and singularity are mutually exclusive. Yet, that is exactly what the doctrine of the Trinity affirms. It affirms that God is one yet he is three persons. Or, you can turn it around and say that God is three persons, yet he is one. And either way you say it, it is bad math.

No theologian in his right mind would ever have come up with a doctrine like that on his own. In the first place, it is not likely the idea would have occurred to him since it defies logic; and secondly, even if it had he would have soon rejected it as absurd because he never would be able adequately to explain it to anyone!

No, the church arrived at the doctrine of the Trinity because it has no other choice. It was a doctrine that grew out of its experience with God. When Christians began to say in a systematic way what they believed about God and how they experienced God, they arrived at the doctrine of the Trinity. In that sense, then, it was a doctrine not of logic but of their experience. Those early Christians knew God as Father, they knew him as Son, and they knew him as the indwelling Holy Spirit. Without all three, their experience of God was incomplete and inadequate. Yet, at the same time they knew that this was one and the same God.

For the Christian today it is the same. Until we know God in our own experience as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, our experience is incomplete. As St. Paul says in our Scripture this morning, "Any one who does not have the spirit of Christ does not belong to him." But such doctrines are of little value except to theologians unless they mean something practical and meaningful to ordinary Christians. Dry old doctrines in musty old books have little relevance. But they become living doctrines when they are a daily part of our experience of God. For that reason, I would like for us to look together on this Trinity Sunday to see how God's bad math adds up.

Notice in the first place that God the Father means God above us. He is the God so holy and majestic that the Hebrews did not dare to pronounce his name. As a matter of fact, the Hebrews write without vowels and their name for God was so Holy that when they did not pronounce it for many years, its exact pronunciation was lost. Those of you with a King James Bible will find that word translated "Jehovah" in your bibles. Actually, there is no such Hebrew word. Some translator took the vowels from another Hebrew word for God and put it with the Holy name for God and got the word Jehovah. Scholars now believe the word was either Yahweh, or Yahveh. But this God above them was awesome in his righteousness and justice, he was 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 seabag where ever 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 the creator of heaven and earth; it is he who set the stars in course, who controls the universe, who guides the destiny of all things toward that divine purpose for which he created them. As Jonah discovered, tho he rose up to flee from the presence of the Lord, he could not escape the guardian of the universe. And tho 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 of creation and who will ultimately direct the affairs of man. What a blessed assurance it is to know that time, that history, that we ourselves are in the hands of an almighty God who is far above and beyond what we can ever imagine - a God above us who is our father.

Notice 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 favor of his god in order to be saved. But move over into the New Testament and see what a different atmosphere you breath! God is not against us, demanding what we cannot give; God is for us, doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

In Greece a few weeks ago we passed Mt. Olympus, the supposed home of the Greek gods. It was there upon those towering, lofty heights where the gods stayed. But that is a far cry from the little town of Bethlehem where God came down to man, where he took our form upon himself and was born in a lowly manger - yes, God for us. As the Bible puts it, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself.." or again, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son..." You can search the dusty books of the religions of man, but only in Jesus 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 up the extra bedroom 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 lackluster 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, "alright, 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 we ought to be and cannot be it. What we do need to know is that someone is 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 - in Jesus, God is for us.

But notice in the third place that not only is God above us, not only is God for us, but the doctrine of the Trinity means supremely that God is with us. And is this not what we really need? We do not need a God 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, in the midst 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 desperate 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..."

Just yesterday the paper had an article about the Mausoleum the Chinese people are building for Mao Tse-tung who died last September. The article states, "Mao Tse-tung is destined to lie in state in perpetuity, visible proof to future generations that such a man did indeed once live..." The followers of Jesus need no such Mausoleum, no such visible proof that Jesus once lived. No, for if we are his, we have his Spirit in our hearts. He is with us.

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 25 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.

That's how God's bad math adds up. And it really does add up, after all. 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 came to take our place and die our death for our sins 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; and whatever life brings, whatever our sorrow or disappointment or pain or need, He is with us and in joyful gratitude we can sing, "Nearer my God, to Thee..."