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One in Three? – John 16:12-15

Growing up, I loved to figure out how things worked. My gang of friends was always taking things apart, and we spent hours messing around with bicycles, engines, radios – anything that could be messed with.

Not that we were particularly good at it – more than one object of our attempts to understand did not survive the process.

So I have always felt in the back of my mind that I was a sort of tinkerer, and curious about how things work.

Recently, though, I've come to accept that I'm much more interested in *using* things that work than knowing how they *do* work. This explains a lot to me, really: when the office copier goes down, don't ask me to get it going again. When I sit down at the computer, I'm not interested in the incredible things it can do so much as that it will let me type my sermon or answer some email.

And we're spoiled – so many things work so well now, it isn't so necessary to know how to fix them. As someone who used to take carburetors apart, change brake fluid and oil, anymore all I want is just get in the car, turn the key, put 'er in drive, and go. Remember dealing with chokes and flooded engines?

There is so much that we depend upon these days that we simply don't understand (well, the average person doesn't, anyway) – and not just incredible things like telephones in our pockets (or telephones themselves), but television, pacemakers, and all the amazing things that happen when we start our cars – electronics in general.

But we don't really need to know, most of us, *how* they work; we simply need them *to* work.

Which brings us to Trinity Sunday, today, when once again I'm going to try and tackle one of the most difficult doctrines of our faith.

And yet, the Trinity is fundamental to Christianity. Why do we put so much emphasis on this article of faith that's so hard to understand? How does it play out in my own – your own – faith?

Sometimes listening to explanations of the Trinity must feel like you're trying to figure out the latest gadget someone says will make your life simpler. But really, it's more like television, or cell phones, or computers – something we just use, and don't know – and don't really need to know - how it works to use it. As Jesus says in today's lesson,

“I have much more to say to you, but you can’t handle it now.” The Trinity is one of those things I’m not sure we can handle in our lifetime!

Still, Jesus says that we’ll have help understanding God’s work in and among us, promised to the disciples, given to us: the Holy Spirit. In faith, let’s see if we can understand how the Trinity is important to us – or, maybe, how we’re making use of it. Instead of puzzling us, how can it make our faith stronger, enhance our sense of God’s presence?

So, basically, what is this doctrine? It’s not explicitly declared in Scripture; nowhere does it say that God is three persons, equal in divinity yet distinct, but it is strongly inferred. The one God we worship is made known to us in three ways, what theology calls somewhat awkwardly “persons”: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Over the years, those persons have been described by other words, too: Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer is one many people like. But the problem seems always that when we start to talk about one of these persons, it can feel like we’re talking about one member of a family – and since the beginning, those theologians who try to keep our faith in order have insisted that the three must always be one – while that one is known to us as three. Whew.

Which begs the question: if this piece of faith is so important, why is it so hard? Clearly, it is important; all our statements of faith speak to it, all of them allude to it, all of them by including the Trinity

acknowledge that it is key to Christianity. The opening of A Brief Statement of Faith, our creed for this morning that we'll read in a few minutes, is all about the Trinity, says flat out that "we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel, whom alone we worship and serve."

There are other elements of faith that may be just as difficult: why is God? Why did God become a human being in Jesus? Why do the parts of God's purpose we see play out around us seem so, well, un-Godly so much of the time?

These are mysteries. And it's important to know that in the thought of Scripture and our faith, a mystery isn't a question without an answer, it's something with an answer we're not privileged to know, or which is beyond our grasp. Something we can't handle now.

And, yes, the Trinity is a mystery. But I think its importance isn't bound up with what it *is*, so much as with what it *does*. The doctrine of the Trinity is a feeble human attempt to describe how the God of the universe operates!

So, here's the thing: I believe that, just as we're crafted somehow in the very image of God, our humanity reflects this divine relationship of Trinity in us. How do you incarnate, put skin on, this esoteric idea? Or, more simply, instead of looking at the Trinity as difficult or intellectual, why not try and consider how this "God in three persons" idea operates in our lives? Because this concept was not just created to

give theologians something to do, it comes from how we know, how we experience, God working in ways we encounter God every day – even if we may not recognize it.

In fact, we probably don't realize it. For most of us most of the time, God is sort of in the background – like that cell phone signal.

Basically, the doctrine of the Trinity is about how we experience God. Jesus Christ brought a whole new understanding of God to humanity, and the Spirit does, too. What the concept of the Trinity tries to do is help our human minds grasp something of this amazing God who didn't just create the universe, but created you and me and cares about each of us.

That's pretty tough to grasp all by itself!

So, let's consider God the Father to be our thinking selves – that part of us that is aware, that thinks. Don't take it too far, just give me that piece. It's in our minds that we know that we are; it's where we think and where we have ideas; it's where we know.

But if we simply stay in our head, then the only one who knows about those thoughts is us. There has to be a way for them to come into reality. That's where our bodies come in.

It's our physical body that makes it possible for those ideas to become more than ideas. It's through our bodies that we are able to

share our thoughts, our feelings with others. It's with our bodies that we are able to create and form and touch. It's with our bodies that we can help others – how we can serve God. It's with our bodies that we are present in the world. Our bodies are the interface between our minds and the world.

So, then, the second person of the Trinity, the Son, the creative Word that brought everything into existence, is like your body – how your mind exists in the world.

But there is another part to this – how we relate to others around us. We can speak of this as relationships, as love or affection, as the unseen bonds of friendship, as any of the things that bind our relationships with each other and creation.

That is the work of the Holy Spirit: how we interact with the world, how we are *in* the world *with* others.

Trinity is something we can only glimpse: it can't be fully described. But like a fleeting glimpse, what is seen is no less real than something always there.

You could think of it as head, hands, and heart. The head is full of ideas; the hands make them real, the heart draws us into relationship.

We are made, Scripture says, somehow in the image of God. And while we are not Trinitarian beings like God, perhaps some of this

wonderful capacity to be aware, be present, and be in relationship with each other is a tiny taste of how God crafted us to be like him.

Think of it as visiting with a friend. You're aware of your surroundings, what you know about your friend, your own history. That's the head. At the same time, you're present with your friend: your hands. And your conversation? That's the interaction, that's the heart.

Simple, but just one way of imagining Trinity in us.

So, every now and then, when you think about it, picture yourself being in these three ways: living, acting, and interacting, and give thanks to the Triune God who made us capable of doing all three.