

During Lent, the 3rd grade Sunday School class at First Methodist was asked to draw something depicting the last part of Jesus' earthly life. Most were easy to figure out. One drawing showed a man with a whip chasing people out of the temple. Another pictured 13 men eating at a table. A third depicted a man being approached by a mob with clubs. But one picture was puzzling. It was of an airplane, with two smiling faces sticking out of the cockpit windows. So the teacher asked the student to explain what he drew. "Well," the boy said, "*that first man is Jesus.*" "OK," the teacher thought, "*that fits.*" "Who's the other person?" she asked "That's Pontius," he said. "OK," the teacher thought, "*that fits, too.*" "Why the plane?" she asked. "*It belongs to Pontius,*" the boy said, "*because you told us Pontius was a pilot.*"

Children are not the only ones who can have a hard time understanding God. For every child who has a bizarre notion about God, there is also an adult who doesn't understand God or His ways. And often it is that adult who doesn't understand God or His ways that taught the child their bizarre notion about God. Which shouldn't surprise us. It is hard to describe GOD. It is difficult to explain how God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omni-present. And it is impossible to reconcile how God is both loving and just. In fact, if you think you fully understand God, and can perfectly explain God and His ways to others, you'd be the first in history to able to do so.

We see this in a story about Augustine, a 4th century African bishop whose theological work, The City of God, was the primary seminary textbook of the Church for a millennium. One day, Augustine is said to have been walking on a beach pondering the doctrine of the Trinity. As he did so, he encountered a boy. Using a sea shell, the boy was taking water from the ocean and dumping it in a hole in the sand. "What are you doing?" Augustine asked. "Trying to put the ocean in this hole" the boy said, "what are you doing?" "The same thing," Augustine said, "standing on the shores of time, I am trying to get into my finite mind things that are infinite."

In fact, the difficulty of trying to enable us finite and limited beings to understand the triune God is so great the Bible does not attempt to do it in a single passage. Instead, in passage after passage, the Bible just gives us glimpses of the Triune God. But even when we put the glimpses together, we still end up with something that only amounts to a sea shell's worth of ocean. Which is helpful to keep in mind when we, like Augustine, ponder the doctrine of the Trinity. Because even if God had given us a full explanation in a single passage, we still wouldn't fully grasp what He meant by what He said. In speaking to this, John Wesley said, "*bring me a worm that can comprehend a man, and I will show you a man that can comprehend the Triune God.*"

In terms of the glimpses of the triune God the Bible gives us, they start early. The Bible opens saying "*in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*" And the next verse, verse 2 of the whole Bible, says that while the earth at this point was "*formless and empty, [and] darkness was over the surface of the deep . . . the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.*" When the Apostle John started His gospel by speaking of that same act of creation, he wrote that "*in the beginning was the Word [that is Jesus], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being by Him.*" And in his epistle, the Apostle James wrote "*every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.*" So in 3 different passages, we see a different person of the Trinity

named as having had a hand in creation. Not because there are three gods who each did something to create the world, but because God is a triune being.

As we ponder this, someone may ask “*Why bother with this conundrum? Why not move on to things we can understand?*” But the problem with that line of thinking is if we do not at least try to understand how God is three yet one, it is likely that we will not know much about WHO it is to whom we are praying. And until we understand at least a bit of WHO it is to whom we are praying we will probably try to use our prayers to remake God in our image - imagining God to be who we want Him to be, and trying to make Him bring about OUR will on earth, not His. So let’s ponder for right now what it means be in relationship with a triune God.

To be in relationship with a triune God, we must relate to Him as “Father.” Jesus told us this in the Lord’s Prayer. And in that prayer, he used the word “*Abba*” to address God. That Aramaic word was used to speak of a being who is above us and beyond us: a parent. A parent, of course, had a part in our creation. They provided for us. They gave us shelter. And they cared for us, nurtured us, and taught us. In doing so (especially before we could do such things for ourselves) they held supremacy over us. No matter how much we grew, developed, and matured, they were always ahead of us, if not in ability and knowledge at least in experience and age. As a result, it was to our parent that we turned in times of danger or need.

We see this role of the triune God in our lives in a boy in ancient Rome. One day, he saw people lining up along the street. The emperor was returning from battle, and the people were preparing to celebrate. But as he stood there, a group of boys began to bully him. Just then, the emperor’s chariot rolled up. So the boy raced toward the chariot. But before he could get there, a soldier grabbed him. “*Where do you think you’re going?*” he snarled. “*To him for protection!*” the boy said as he pointed to the emperor. “*What makes you think you have the right to bother the emperor with your childish problems?*” the soldier snarled. “*Because,*” the boy said, “*while he’s YOUR emperor, he’s MY daddy!*” But God is more than just “Father.”

To be in relationship with a triune God, we must also relate to Him as “Son.” That is because while the first image tells us God is above us and beyond us, this image tells us God is with us, beside us, and bound up in our lives. This means that the “Son” is God made visible and brought into our experiences. It also means that in the “Son,” the mysterious Father above breaks through the veil of mystery so we might not only know ABOUT Him but live in relationship WITH Him. In the Son, the Father not only therefore brings us the comfort of knowing He is with us in the midst of the mess we call life, He also brings us the assurance that He can get us through the mess since He is walking with us through the Son every step of the way.

We see this role of the triune God in our lives in a woman who pulled into a truck stop during a snowstorm. It had taken her an hour to travel the last mile, and she didn’t think her small car could get her where she needed to go. As she sat at the counter, she began to cry. A couple of truckers came over and asked what was wrong. Between sobs, she said that her father was dying and she was trying to get home before he passed away. One of the truckers said “*we’ll hug you.*” Thinking he

meant something physical, she said *“don’t touch me or I’ll call the police!”* *“That’s not what he meant,”* the second trucker said, *“we’re headed in your direction, and we’d be glad to put one of our trucks in front of you and the other truck behind you. That way, we’ll ‘hug’ you through the storm.”* The “Son” does the same thing to help us through the storms of life. But God is more than just “Father.” And God is more than just “Son.”

To be in relationship with a triune God, we must finally relate to Him as “Holy Spirit.” For God is not just above us and beyond us. And God is not just beside us. God seeks to dwell IN us. As the “Holy Spirit,” God seeks to move beyond dwelling in a temple made BY hands to dwell a temple made OF hands . . . and feet, and hearts, and minds. This is why the Apostle Paul wrote *“do you not know your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit . . . therefore honor God with your bodies.”* And he wrote that because the “Holy Spirit” seeks to enable us to internalize what we hear about God in such a way that we do not just have “head faith,” which is knowledge ABOUT God and His ways, but also “heart faith,” which is the personal knowledge OF God through being in relationship with Him.

We see this role of the triune God in our lives in a man who applied for a telegraph operator job. When he arrived at the telegraph office for the interview, he joined others in a waiting room. Eventually, the man heard a familiar sound through the wall. So he listened carefully. Then he got up, walked to the far end of the building, opened a door, and went in. 10 minutes later a man came out, and told the group the job was filled. *“HOW?”* a man yelled, *“you haven’t interviewed anybody!”* *“We did,”* the man said, *“we tapped on the wall in morse code to say ‘if you want the job, come to the office at the end of the building.’ Only one man responded. He has the job”* The Holy Spirit seeks to do something similar by enabling us to see - and obey - what He calls us to DO in God’s name with our hands and feet, and hearts, and minds each day.

s we read the Bible to see what it says about how to KNOW THE UNKNOWABLE GOD, we therefore find that it tells us we do so by relating to God as “Father.” We do this by allowing Him to care for us, protect us, and mold our lives as a divine parent. It tells us to relate to God as “Son.” We do so by inviting Jesus to walk with us through the problems of life, teaching us along the way how to live the sacrificial life of the cross. And it tells us to relate to God as “Holy Spirit.” We do so by allowing Him to change us from the inside out by obeying His guidance to use our hands, feet, hearts, and minds to do the will of the Father *“on earth as in heaven.”*

Unfortunately, too many Christians think they already know God fully. Too many Christians believe they have the way to live a holy life figured out. And too many Christians fail to realize that in this fallen and sinful world, we - as Paul said - only *“see in a mirror darkly,”* and it will not therefore be until we see God *“face to face”* that the need to go deeper in our relationship with God each day by seeking to know Him - and His ways - better and better will end. We see this, however, in Isaiah 55. There, the prophet tells us God says *“my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. [For] as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”* For God - in ALL His fullness and glory, is not fully knowable to our finite and limited minds. We just can’t grasp all that God is, and how God thinks, and how

what GOD does is always fully loving and just.

But rather than leave us in such a discouraging situation, God tells us through the prophet Jeremiah that He will help us understand what we NEED to understand about Him and His ways when “*you seek me with all your heart.*” That is because the goal of life for Christians is not to UNDERSTAND God and His ways. The goal is to be in RELATIONSHIP with God. For while we will never fully understand God, or His ways, as we (like Augustine), are “*standing on the shores of time, trying to get into our finite mind things that are infinite,*” we CAN understand what we need to understand to live in deep and growing relationship with Him if we seek Him - as Jeremiah said - “*with all your heart.*”

It is also why Jesus told Nicodemus it is not those who fully UNDERSTAND how to be ‘born again,’ but those who BELIEVE in Him that shall be born again and receive “*eternal life.*” And why the Apostle Paul said we are saved by “*grace through faith.*” For by grace through faith, we can KNOW the UNKNOWABLE God in such fullness that we are able to relate to God as our Divine Father. By grace through faith, we are able to KNOW the UNKNOWABLE God in such fullness that we are able to see - and experience - the presence of Jesus in our lives. And by grace through faith, we are able to KNOW the UNKNOWABLE God in such fullness we can follow the lead of the Holy Spirit to live out what He reveals to us as the holy and righteous life we were created by our Triune God to live - even when we don’t fully understand how such things bring about for us “*eternal life.*”