

Natalie Ford
June 19, 2011

Three in One
Matthew 28:16-20, 1 Corinthians 13:13

In the book *The Shack*, Mack Phillip's six year old daughter Missy is abducted on Labor Day weekend, as Mack takes his three youngest children on a campout. As Mack is trying to rescue his son and daughter from a tipped canoe, Missy is kidnapped from the campsite. Clues reveal that she was abducted by a serial killer, and all that is ever found of her is her little red dress in an old abandoned shack. Her body is never discovered.

But something else is.

A *note* comes to Mack four years later, signed from Papa, asking him to meet at the shack.

Not knowing whether this is the God who his wife and children affectionately call Papa, or some sick joke from the killer, Mack goes to the shack alone.

And it is there that he has an encounter with the *Trinity*—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

God, or Papa, is portrayed as a large African American woman who is taking care of the shack—which has been transformed into something beautiful.

The Son, Jesus, is a middle eastern handyman who takes Mack on a walk across the river.

And *the Spirit* is a slight Asian woman, who blows around the room, and often vanishes from his sight.

After meeting all three—*Papa, Jesus, and Spirit*, Mack is confused. He thinks to himself, “maybe this was a Trinity. But two women and none of them white? Then again, why had he naturally assumed that God would be white as him? He knew his mind was rambling, so he focused on the one question he wanted answered.

“Then, Which one of you is God?”
 “I Am” said all three in unison.”

Mack learns that the three **think** as one, **love** one another as one, and **enjoy** one another’s company.

They are three distinct people, and yet they are *one* in their love for one another, and their love for Mack.

They slowly but surely teach Mack that their loving relationship, the relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit-- is what they desire US to have with them.

Their relationship is a model for our relationships with God, and one another.

His weekend with them proves to be both *eye opening and healing*.

When he leaves his encounter with the three-in-one God, he finds that the Great Sadness that had haunted him every moment after losing Missy, is finally gone.

The book was *controversial* in its portrayal of God; however, it’s a *beautiful* book because it tries to portray the Trinity in ways the human mind can understand.

It attempts to picture that which is ultimately beyond our imagination, but is a concept we need to be spiritually whole.

It’s also beautiful because it depicts the *relationship* that is God.

Father, Son and Spirit work, love, and live as one but three.

They are in relationship just as we are to be in relationship, with God, and with one another.

The controversial part of the book--a *woman* portraying God, is apparently healing for Mack, who had a bad relationship with his own earthly father. Had the character been different, so might the portrayal of God the Father.

But I think the *point* of the portrayals of God is that God is beyond our imagination, God is not necessarily just like us, or what we can easily picture.

Those of us who are overwhelmed with life, worry, and the daily grind may say at this point—

Great. Interesting. But why do I care about the Trinity?

Isn’t it enough to just believe in God? Or Jesus?

But think of it this way—

what if God was not three-in-one, loving and in relationship?

Our passage today is the Great Commission reminding us to go out and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We are supposed to bring people in a Trinitarian faith. But...

What if we only baptized people in the name of *God the Father*?

Then we'd miss out on the Jesus who became **one of us**,
and the Spirit that **empowers** us to do anything at all.

What if we baptized people in the name of *Jesus Christ*?

Then we'd miss out on the great **Creator** God, maker of heaven and earth, and the
Spirit that is the ongoing **presence of God** inside each and every one of us!

What if we baptized people in the name of the *Spirit only*?

We would miss the **creative** nature of God the Father
and the God Jesus Christ who died for our sins and rose from death that we might have life eternal!

See how much we need all three persons in God!

It's like looking at a many faceted *jewel*—looking at one side certainly doesn't reveal all the glory.

It's like asking to have a *tree* with just a root, no trunk or branches.

Or just the branches, or just a trunk.

St. Augustine said the Trinity is like that tree—needing all three elements, to make up what we know as wood.

It's like a *play*, say Hamlet. It's first in the mind of the playwright,

Then it's written down on paper.

Then it's acted out on stage.

All three are expressions of the same play.

All three are equally important.

In his book ‘Christian Doctrine’ Shirley Guthrie wrote,
 “The same God who is *over us* as God the Father,
 and *with us and for us* in God the Son,
 is also God *inside us and among us* as God the Spirit” (Christian
 Doctrine, pg. 80, 1994.)

We need the concept of a *Triune God*—
 it’s not enough to just believe and follow Jesus.
 Or just believe in God.
 Or just be filled with the Spirit.

Our *minds are too limited* to understand God without all these three persons,
 and *God would be limited* without all three persons—
 loving one another in relationship, and showing us how to love
 one another.

As the people of God, we are immersed into the *whole being of God*,
 whether we understand it all or not.

We are connected to God the Father and *Creator*,
 we are loved by Jesus the *Redeemer*,
 we are filled up with the Holy Spirit our *Sustainer*.

This is **good news** indeed for all those who are feeling distant from God,
 or disconnected from love, or simply out of hope.

We have a Father God who *creates* new opportunities,
 A Savior who *takes away* sin and sorrow,
 A Spirit who *fills us* with courage and strength to face
 tomorrow.

What does it mean to you? How does that affect your faith?

The Triune God is important to us—as it was to the people of God always.

All this, although the word, “*trinity*” does not occur in the Bible.

“Trinity,” comes from the church describing the work of God,
 about the year 200 CE.

The word, “trinity,” comes from a Latin word, “trinitas”,
 meaning three. And although the word, “trinity,” does not occur
 in the Bible, the concept of the Trinity is found throughout the
 scriptures.

Even in the creation story, in the original language, God says let us create them man and woman in '*our*' *image*. Did you know that?

There are about twenty-three Bible verses about the Trinity in the New Testament.

The gospel accounts of *Jesus baptism* are clearly Trinitarian—God the Father speaks to the Son, and the Spirit descends upon him as a dove before leading him into the desert to be tempted by Satan.

The *Gospel of John* has many Trinitarian images,
 Jesus continually talks about being one with the Father,
 and sending his Spirit, the Holy Spirit when he leaves this earth.

2 Corinthians 13:13 is a Trinitarian formula probably common to the early church: "The *grace* of the Lord Jesus Christ, the *love* of God (the Father), and the *communion* (or fellowship) of the Holy Spirit be with all of you."

In all of these passages, we don't hear the word, "trinity,"
 But we certainly *see and hear* the Triune God.

An early church father named *Tertullian* gave us the concept of God as three different personas or auras of personhood. Tertullian said that God had the persona of the Father, the persona of the Son and the persona of the Spirit. People have personas and so does God. You might be a father, a son, a husband. All three are your personas.
 I am a pastor, mother, daughter—all three parts of my one person.

The ancient **creeds** of the church are deeply Trinitarian. Turn for just a moment in your Presbyterian Hymnal to page 14, for the *Apostle's Creed*. This creed is called the Apostle's Creed, because this creed was named after the Apostles. The Apostle's Creed was the *baptismal* creed of the church. For nineteen hundred years of church history, every time there was a baptism, the church members recited the Apostle's Creed. When we have a baptism in we say the Apostle's Creed. Each article is about one part of the Trinity.

The *Nicene Creed*, is also trinitarian. This creed was written in the year 325 CE, when Constantine was the emperor of the Roman Empire, an emperor who insisted that you be Christian to be part of his empire. Like the Apostle's Creed, the Nicene affirms our belief in a Triune God.

Being **Christian** is not just about following Christ.

Being in the **church** is not just about following Christ.

We are Trinitarian.

We believe that **God** is the creator of the universe and it still creating today.

We believe that God was fully present saving us in the person of **Jesus** Christ.

We also believe that God is in us , and the **Holy Spirit** is fully God.

This belief in the Trinity is what makes our faith so **rich, so beautiful**.

The relationship of the Trinity is what helps us **relate** to God.

We are better if we love all three personas,

Not leaving one aspect of God out,

But knowing that God IS relationship.

And we are to be the same.

What does it mean to you that our God IS a loving relationship?

Mack's time at the shack was **life changing** because of his encounter with the Trinity.

It wouldn't have been healing in the same way had it just been time with God the Father, or just Jesus the Savior, or just the mysterious Holy Spirit.

He needed time with all three, to understand the complexities of God, but most of all to understand the deep, abiding love of God.

We too need this Trinity to know the love of God,

And to learn to love one another.

May we learn from the divine relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit,

And may it help us to live and love as well.

Amen.