

I

Many of you have heard this old joke, but I wonder if you have caught its religious significance. It is about a pilot and three passengers a boy scout, a priest, and an atomic scientist and a plane that develops engine trouble in mid flight. The pilot rushed back to the passenger compartment and exclaims, "The plane is going down! We only have three parachutes, and there are four of us! I have a family waiting for me at home. I must survive!" With that, he grabs one of the parachutes and jumps out of the plane. The atomic scientist jumps to his feet at this point and declares, "I am the smartest man in the world. It would be a great tragedy if my life was snuffed out!" With that, he also grabs a parachute and exits the plane. With an alarmed look on his face, the priest says to the boy scout, "My son, I have no family. I am ready to meet my Maker. You are still young with much ahead of you. You take the last parachute." At this point, the boy scout interrupts the priest, "Hold on, Father. Don't say any more. We're all right. The world's smartest man just jumped out of the plane wearing my knapsack!"

There are a lot of smart people today, successful people, affluent people, but they are jumping out of airplanes wearing knapsacks instead of parachutes. Buckminster Fuller once said: "The universe is a locked safe with the combination on the inside." For once in his life, this brilliant Englishman was dead wrong. There IS meaning and purpose. There is truth that is knowable, understandable, and eternal. The early church summed up this truth in the doctrine we know as the Trinity: God, the Father; God the Son; God, the Holy Spirit.

It is true that the word "Trinity" does not occur in the Bible nor does it occur in the writings of the early church fathers until the third century after Christ's resurrection. It is a manmade formula but it is based upon sound Biblical faith. The doctrine of the Trinity properly understood meets the deepest needs that we have in terms of our understanding of God.

We see God, first of all, as the creator and sustainer of life. God the Father: The Source of All Meaning/All definitions of God: Omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, everlasting. This is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob Lawgiver and Judge. This is God in his transcendent authority, the God whose ways are not our ways, the God whose glory is told by the heavens.

For many of us, however, this God of transcendence seems far removed from us, out of touch with our needs, our concerns unapproachable, and unyielding. There is a story about Sir David Edgeworth, the Australian geologist and explorer, who accompanied Ernest Shackleton on his expedition to the South Pole at the turn of the century. During the South Pole expedition, Sir Edgeworth's assistant, Douglas Mawson, was working in his tent one day when he heard a muffled cry from outside. "Are you very busy?" called the voice, which Mawson recognized as that of Sir Edgeworth. "Yes I am," he replied. "What's the matter?" "Are you really very busy?" "Yes," snapped Mawson, losing his patience. "What is it you want?" After a moment's silence, Sir David replied apologetically, "Well, I'm down a crevasse, and I don't think I can hang on much longer."

Somehow a transcendent God frightens us, puts us off. For He is the God of Justice and Judgment in the Hebrew Scriptures. And thus, God revealed himself in the gently, compassionate Nazarene, who cradled children in his arms, and treated all persons with dignity and respect. In Jesus, the Son, we are exposed to the approachable side of God, the God who would lay down his own life in behalf of the creatures he had formed out of the clay of earth.

Yet we must remember that Jesus says when you see me you see the Father. As any parent knows, a loving parent may appear distant and judgmental to their children, yet their actions are done out of love. God the Father. God the Son.

But there is a third partner to the Trinity for many of us a silent partner. The work of the Holy Spirit has evoked more controversy in the Christian community than perhaps any other issue in our theology. It is a controversy that actually precedes the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost by many centuries. In the midst of the Exodus experience, two leaders of Israel, Eldad and Medad, have the Spirit come upon them, according to the Old Testament narrative, and start prophesying. Joshua, who would one day lead the children of Israel into the Promised Land, Joshua is horrified and wants to restrain them. Wise old Moses, however, disagrees. His response to Joshua's discomfort is to declare: "I wish all were prophets and that all had the Spirit come upon them." I am reminded of Bishop Arthur J. Moore's famous statement that he would "rather restrain a fanatic than try to resurrect a corpse." And yet the Church has always recognized the dangers inherent in excessive, unbridled enthusiasm. Seeking to achieve a balance, our history has seen us swing from one side of the pendulum to the other. Balance is difficult. We dare not, however, ignore the Spirit because we do not understand it.

IN THE FIRST PLACE, THE HOLY SPIRIT IS THE INNER WITNESS OF THE REALITY OF GOD. It is our personal experience of God in His immanence/closeness. It is the confirming testimony that He who created us is with us. According to I John 4, our life in the world is actually His life lived within us. That is the work of the Holy Spirit. Without that inner witness, our lives can deteriorate to a cold formalism at best, and a blind legalism at worst. To be sure, dependence on such inner evidence exposes us to the risk of some superb sanctimonious silliness. I heard about one preacher who announced to his congregation that the Holy Spirit had come upon him, convicted him, and told him to leave for Africa and be a missionary to the heathen. A woman in the audience shouted, "That wasn't the Holy Spirit, that was your exwife!" Discerning the Spirit is one of the most difficult tasks we face.

The Holy Spirit is that presence in our lives that allows us to get our lives together, to achieve spiritual discipline and direction, to take charge of our lives and channel them in ways that glorify God and enrich the world. The word "organize" has a Latin root word meaning to "play an organ." To play an organ one must get all fifteen hundred pipes to sound in harmony. For many of us, it is all too apparent that we are restrained and restricted from being effective and successful in our living because of inner conflicts. We are being pushed and pulled from within. We desperately need the Spirit of God to come into our lives and take those contrary thoughts and feelings and bring them

together. To achieve such a unity of mind and heart requires a surrender of all we are and all we hope to be to the presence and power of God. The sad truth is that we want a partial experience of God's Spirit without total surrender. A letter was addressed to the General Electric Company from a little girl in the third grade who had chosen to investigate electricity for her class project. "I'm trying to get all the information I can," her letter said, "so please send me any booklets and papers you have. Also would it be asking too much for you to send me a little sample of electricity?" Many of us want just a sample of the Spirit. We tremble at the idea of God coming into our lives and taking total possession of our thoughts, our feelings, our dreams, our ambitions. Thus we never achieve that oneness of mind and purpose so necessary for effective living.

The Holy Spirit is the inward evidence, the indwelling presence, that which allows us to organize and prioritize our lives. It is the Holy Spirit that gives us the peace and assurance to cope daily with life's varied demands. Again we return to the Old Testament and find in I Samuel 16: 25 that when the Spirit of the Lord left King Saul, Saul was filled with depression and fear. It is the Holy Spirit that gives a lift to our lives and helps us stand on higher ground. A mother and child once stood looking at the beautiful picture of Christ standing at the door knocking. After a moment of thought, the mother said, "I wonder why they don't let him in?" The child considered this and then replied, "The reason they don't let him in is that they are down in the cellar and they can't hear him knocking." It is the Holy Spirit that lifts us out of the cellars of life by giving us inner evidence of the power and purpose of God.

THE HOLY SPIRIT IS EVIDENCE; THE HOLY SPIRIT IS ENABLER. It is the Spirit that gives us the ability not only to organize our lives, but also to carry through to victory. Virgil Hurley tells of a fire that broke out in a department store in Tijuana, Mexico in February, 1983. Before being extinguished, it devastated eight businesses in a surrounding area. Just the day before Tijuana firemen had been in San Diego receiving advanced training in firefighting techniques. But superior firefighting methods could not help when the city's water mains wouldn't pump enough water to quench the fire. The Holy Spirit is that power which enables us to fulfill our good intentions. It is knowing that we are not alone that allows us to be strong and to carry through. others.

We must remember that the Trinity is one and each person always acts in unity with the others. During this Mass, a prayer directed to the Father, the Holy Spirit descends upon the gifts of bread and wine and changes them into the Body and Blood of the Second Person of the Trinity.

In creation, the Father says, "Let there be."

The Son is those words and the Spirit hovered over the water.

Never divide up the work of the Trinity.

Why settle for a knapsack instead of a parachute? A parachute gently lowers us to the

ground; a paraclete, which is the Biblical word for the Spirit, lifts us to the heavens. Let's praise the Father, and praise the Son, but let's not neglect the silent partner, the Spirit that indwells us and empowers us to be all that God calls us to be.

II

In the late 1980s, artist Jim Sanborn was hired to create a piece of art to be displayed at the CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia. This was a big commission! What an honor to create a unique piece of art for the CIA. Sanborn thought he would have a little fun with this project. He contacted Edward Scheidt, the retired chairman of the CIA's Cryptographic Center. Scheidt is an expert in encryption and cryptology. Sanborn wanted Scheidt to help him create a message in code for his CIA art piece.

On Nov. 3, 1990, Jim Sanborn's piece of art was unveiled at CIA headquarters. It's called Kryptos, which is the Greek word for "hidden." It's a giant copper screen that looks like a wavy, unrolled scroll. On this giant screen, there is a word puzzle. To the untrained eye, it looks like a mass of random letters. But Sanborn and Scheidt say there are four encrypted, or hidden, messages within that mass of letters. And those four messages make up a riddle.

Jim Sanborn thought the folks at the CIA would figure out the puzzle in a matter of weeks. He was wrong. Over the past 30 years, three of the four messages have been decoded. The fourth one remains a mystery. And even if someone were to correctly decode the fourth message, they'd still have to put the four messages together and solve the riddle. Code experts and amateurs all over the world are working on cracking the code and revealing the message of Kryptos. (1)

Can you imagine spending 30 years or more trying to decode a hidden message or solve a riddle? And there's no prize involved. This isn't a message that is going to save lives or reveal the mysteries of the universe. Yet how many people are investing time and skill into cracking its code?

An even more fascinating form of hidden message comes from the year 499 BC. There was a Greek ruler [named Histiaeus] who tried to stir up a revolt against the Persian king Darius I. There is an old legend that he sent the plans for the revolt to his nephew by shaving the head of his servant and tattooing a message about the revolt on the servant's scalp. Then he let the servant's hair grow back over the tattoo, and sent the servant to visit his nephew, with instructions to shave his servant's head once he arrived. (2)

What an ingenious way to hide a message in plain sight! Turning the messenger into the message. Think about that for a moment. The messenger became the message. That sounds exactly like what God did when He wanted to share the most important message in history with us. He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to be both the messenger and the message. John, in the prologue to his Gospel wrote, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us . . ."

I think hidden messages are fascinating, but I am so grateful that God didn't hide His message from us. No cryptology, no codes, no puzzles, no fine print. In the Garden of Eden, God walked with Adam and Eve. And God communicated with them. The Creator and the creations lived in relationship with one another until the day when Adam and Eve chose to break that relationship of trust. Later God spoke directly to people like Noah and Abraham and Sarah and Jacob. And God spoke through the prophets like Isaiah and Amos and Hosea. If you read the Bible from start to finish, you'll see that God is always trying to

communicate with His people. And God's message to us is plain and simple and backed up by God's own character. So if the incredible expanse of human history covered in the 66 books of the Bible could be distilled into one completely essential message, what would it be?

John tells us in the most famous single verse in the Bible—John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

Martin Luther called this “the Gospel in miniature.” In other words, if all the Bibles in the world suddenly disappeared and we could hold only to this one verse, we would know everything that is absolutely vital.

I read about this big conference where speaker after speaker lined up to speak on various topics. Finally, the last speaker of the evening stepped up to the mic. He said, “I have only ten minutes, I barely know where to start.”

From the back of the room, someone shouted, “Start at the ninth minute.” (3)

If the writer of Scripture had ten minutes to explain God's character, God's love and God's plans for humanity, then he might start the ninth minute with this verse: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

**For God so loved the world . . .** That is the beginning of it all—the mind and heart of God. The statement that defines reality. That defines the universe. That defines all human experience. God so loved the world . . . The same God that Isaiah saw “high and lifted up” on the day that King Uzziah died. The same God who guided the Children of Israel through the wilderness with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. The same God who spoke—and the earth was created. This same God so loved.

But look what God loved—the world. I don't believe John meant by this that God is crazy about mountains or lakes or deserts or sunflowers or whatever. I believe he was talking about people. Creative and crafty humanity. That's who God loves. This complex creature who makes deserts bloom and lakes die. People of every color and nationality and culture and ability and personality. The world. That's truly limitless love. That's who God loves. Us!

A few years ago, a high school teacher in Colorado named Brittni Darras found out that one of her best students had come very close to committing suicide. Darras was heartbroken to think that one of her students could be so despondent that she would consider taking her own life. So Darras asked the girl's mother if she could write her daughter a letter.

In the letter, Brittni Darras told the girl what she saw when she looked at her. She saw a young woman with a great personality and intellect. A young woman with a bright future. When the girl received the letter, she remarked to her mother, “I didn't think anyone would say such nice things to me. I didn't think anyone would miss me when I'm gone.”

The letter had such a positive effect on that young student that Brittni Darras committed to writing a personal letter to every single one of her students—all 130 of them—to tell them all the good things she saw in them.

Darras says that her students loved their letters. They read them over and over again. They shared them with their friends. One girl said, “I’m going to keep this forever.” They never realized before how much they mattered to their teacher. They never realized that she saw something special in each one of them. (4)

“God so loved the world. . .” God’s love for all of us is limitless. If God’s love for us is limitless, then what do we have to fear? Doesn’t it stand to reason that God has good plans and purposes for us? Doesn’t it stand to reason that we can come to God with anything, including our doubts and questions and failures, and not be turned away?

It’s amazing. That is the first great truth that is essential to our faith. But there is more.

**For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son . . .** That is also amazing! In fact, it is almost beyond comprehension. The very simplicity of the Gospel is an obstacle to our faith. God loves us so much that He was willing to give us the ultimate gift—the gift of his Son. Simple—yet so profound.

Pastor Adrian Rogers makes the point that a lot of people reject the message of God’s love in the life and death of Jesus because it’s too amazing to understand and too simple to accept.

Rogers met a lawyer one day, and they were chatting about the books they read. Rogers said the primary book he read was the Bible. The lawyer thought this was a little short-sighted of Rogers. “If you don’t read any further than that,” the lawyer asked, “how do you know what to talk about when you speak to people?”

Rogers responded that all people everywhere have only three problems: sin, sorrow and death. And he found the wisdom to address those problems in the Bible.

The lawyer disagreed. There are so many more problems in the world. But Rogers suggested he take some time to think about it and get back to him. The lawyer took some time to ponder their conversation. And when he approached Adrian Rogers again, he said, “Man has only three problems: sin, sorrow and death.”

And Adrian Rogers responded, “And Jesus Christ is the only answer to all three problems. You give me all of the wisdom of this world . . . but there is no other answer apart from the cross.” (5)

Our sin is what separated us from God and broke our relationship with the Creator of Life. And that broken relationship is the source of all our sorrow and of death. But God loves the world too much to let us bear the consequences of our sin. Jesus is the answer to our broken relationship with God. Jesus took on the sin that separates us from God. He died on the cross to put our sins to death once and for all. And he rose from the dead to show us that, through him, our relationship to God, the Source of Life, has been restored.

A famous theologian, Karl Barth, was asked what he thought was the most important word in the New Testament. You would think the answer would be “Jesus” or “faith” or “love” or “grace.” But that wasn’t Karl Barth’s answer. He said the most important word in the New Testament is *huper* (pronounced hoop ER). *Huper*—spelled *h-u-p-e-r*—is a Greek preposition meaning “on behalf of” or “in place of.” So when Barth called *huper* the most important word, he meant the most important of all truths is that we are significant because Jesus took our place on the cross that we may be saved. (6)

It is our understanding of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that God loved the world so much that He gave His one and only Son. But there is still more. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son . . . **that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.**”

It makes no difference what our lives have been like before. It may be that we feel we have been the biggest loser, the biggest failure, the biggest sinner who ever lived. We may have more regrets than a centipede has legs. It makes no difference whatsoever. That is the glory of the Gospel. We can make a new beginning. We can be a new person—the person God created us to be.

Baseball fans are familiar with the name Mickey Mantle. Mantle played 18 seasons with the New York Yankee with great success. Three-time American League Most Valuable Player. Seven World Series titles. Five hundred thirty-six career home runs. Inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame. Few players accomplished all the things Mickey Mantle did.

His life after baseball wasn’t as successful. He turned to drinking heavily and alienated his family and friends. He hurt a lot of people who cared about him.

But one of Mantle’s teammates, Bobby Richardson, never gave up on him. He shared the message of Jesus with Mantle on many occasions and visited him in the hospital when Mantle was recovering from a liver transplant. In 1995, however, as Mickey Mantle lay dying, he finally gave his heart to Christ. Bobby Richardson got to witness the joy and peace that filled Mickey’s last days.

At Mantle’s funeral, Bobby told of how his wife had knelt down next to Mickey’s bed a few days before his death to talk to him about his relationship with God. She wanted to make sure that any questions or doubts had been answered, and that Mickey was fully assured of that relationship. Mickey assured her that he knew everything he needed to know and he recited John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” (7)

God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever—that’s you and me—whoever believes in him **shall not perish but have eternal life.**

What a remarkable promise that is. You and I can have life that never ends through faith in Jesus Christ. You have heard that truth all your life, but have you ever made it your own? It does not require a grand emotional kind of experience. It does not require a spectacular vision.



Your experience of God's grace need not be the same as every other believer's. But there needs to come that time in your life and mine when by faith we make a conscious decision to surrender everything we are and everything we hope to be to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

God so loved the world. That's us. That He gave His only Son. The Lord high and lifted up humbled Himself. For whom? Whoever—that's every one of us regardless of how badly we may have messed up our lives. That whoever believes in him may have eternal life. Have you taken that step of faith? Isn't it time you do it today?

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1. "This sculpture at CIA headquarters holds one of the world's most famous unsolved mysteries" by Christine Champagne and Drew Beebe, July 25, 2020, CNN, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/25/us/kryptos-secret-message-code-trnd/index.html>.

2. "6 Unusual Ways to Send a Message" <https://www.italktelecom.co.uk/blog/6-unusual-ways-to-send-a-message>.

3. Jacob Braude in <http://www.famousquotesandauthors.com> /topics/openers\_and\_introductions\_quotes.html.

4. "Teacher Writes Notes to Over 100 Students After Heartbreaking Incident" by Nicole Pelletiere, Jun 1, 2016, <https://abcnews.go.com/Lifestyle/teacher-writes-notes-100-students-heartbreaking-incident/story?id=39526410>.

5. Sent by Mary Sutherland, <http://monday-fodder.com>.

6. HB Charles, Jr., <https://www.preaching.com/sermons/how-god-says-i-love-you>.

7. From Joseph Stowell in *Moody*, November, 1995, p.4, submitted by Jay Martin, Manistique, Michigan in *Parables, etc.*

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III

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In 1939 the poet T. S. Elliot wrote a book of poems called the *Old Possums Book of Practical Cats*. His poems were taken word for word and transformed by Andrew Lloyd Weber into a musical play which first appeared in London, then became a hit in New York, where it ran for nineteen years. You are probably familiar with the musical: *Cats*.

In his poems, T.S. Elliot says that all cats have three names. The first name is the name that the people the cat lives with give it. You will notice I did not say the people who own the cat. No one ever owns a cat, they just find a way to live with the cat the best they can. Anyway, the guests in the cat's home give the cat a name Like Fluffy or Bitsy or Garfield. According to T.S. Elliott, the cat has a name that other cats know. The cat might be called by the others, McCavity the thieving cat, or Mephistopholes, the magical cat, or Old Deuteronomy, the wise old cat. But, Elliott says, the cat also has a third name. This is a secret name that reflects all that the cat really is. In the poetry, the cat spends all his life contemplating his real name before God.

T. S. Elliott was not writing about cats. He was writing about people. In some ways we all can be thought of as having three names. There is the formal name we receive from our parents. There is the name our friends use. And then, there is that special name which we

receive from God that reflects who we really are. For example, I have a formal name, Monsignor Joseph A. Pellegrino. My second name is the one my friends call me, Fr. Joe, or Msgr, Joe or Mojo. I have another name, a third name, that I do not thoroughly know. That is the name that states who I am in my relationship with God. I received this name from God at my baptism. It expresses my deepest intimacy with God. This name states in a simple voice the unique reflection of God I was created to bring to the world. I was given this name at my baptism. I don't thoroughly know this name. I will have to spend the rest of my life coming to a deeper and deeper knowledge of who I am before God. I will have to spend the rest of my life learning what my name is. You also have three names. The first is your formal name. The second is the one that those who know you use. The third is the name that proclaims to the world your unique relationship with God.

On Trinity Sunday we consider the name of God, Father Son and Spirit. This is more than a theological dogma about God. It is also a doctrine about us. It is an expression of who we are. We are baptized in the name of God. The goal of our lives is to find the particular, unique expression of God's love that we have been empowered to make present in the world. The goal of our lives is to reveal our most profound name.

All who are baptized in the name of the Trinity are called to the Father in Christ through the Holy Spirit. We are called to the Father. The journey of our lives is a

journey to God. This journey may follow the paths of marriage and parenthood, as many of you have taken. This journey may follow the path of the committed single Christian. The path might be that of religious life or holy orders. All journeys derive their meaning from their final destination. The journey of our lives is full of minor chores and major events. Even our routine chores derive their meaning from their final destination. Changing your baby's diaper, telling your child for the hundredth time to clean up his or her room, putting up with your spouse's moods, giving up going out with your friends so you can spend some extra time as a big brother or big sister, going to work and all that entails, going to school and completing all its tasks, all take their meaning as part of our journey to the Father.

We are called to the Father in Christ. Jesus Christ is the Word of God Become Flesh. Our Christmas celebration is a celebration of His Presence not just among us but as one of us. He teaches us who the Father is and how we can best serve Him. Jesus teaches us with His life what love really is. Love, true love, is sacrificial, even to death on a cross. When we journey to the Father through Jesus, we are united to the Tremendous Lover in His eternal sacrifice of himself to the Father. The greatest steps we take in our journey to God are the steps we take away from our own selfishness. Christian is our name and our claim. We seek God not through the loss of personality like so many cults, or through attaining a clear state of consciousness like Scientology, or even through a loss of all thoughts. We don't look for God in some sort of inner

energy. We seek God through sacrificial love. We are called to the Father through Jesus Christ, the Tremendous Lover.

We are called to the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit. We are given the power and the grace to love as God loves so others might experience the presence of God working in us. We are the vehicles of the Holy Spirit. Our journey to God is not merely a matter of our individual relationship with God. We journey to God so that others might join us in the journey that gives meaning to life. We journey to God so others can see Him in us and also be led to His presence.

The intimate name we have received is the name that best reflects our unique sharing in the Blessed Trinity. Baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we are called to allow our lives to have meaning by being faithful to our name. A hundred years from now, a thousand years from now, ten thousand years from now, our participation in all the petty wants and desires and ambitions the world has decreed are the marks of a successful person will be forgotten. No one will recall if we owned a Rolls and a yacht, or a Hyundai and a canoe. But a hundred years from now, a thousand years from now, ten thousand years from now, the world will still enjoy the impact of our lives if we have illuminated the world with our own unique reflection of God. The world will be a better place if we make the journey, approaching the Father through the Son with the power of the Holy Spirit.

