

- 1) The closer to home your experience is, the harder it is to put into words.
- At last Sunday’s Adult Education Forum, there was a fascinating presentation by Sustainable Harvest International on its efforts in Honduras to help local farmers replace “slash and burn” agriculture with organic farming. One of the presenters described his investment in the project as “transforming”. He was referring not to the landscape of *Honduras*, but the landscape of his own *heart*. But, though much was said about the *former* transformation, there were almost no words the *latter*. He left so much unsaid.
 - A few days later, ABC News anchor Dian Sawyer interviewed a large group of Louisiana residents directly impacted by the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. She pumped them for their experiences and reactions. The responses, however, came in terse phrase with few words, most of them clichés. Asked about how their faith was sustaining them in the crisis, the group spontaneously responded by breaking out in the familiar strains of *Amazing Grace* (which did not seem a particularly direct response to her question).
 - In trying to describe these two very different “close-to-home” experiences, those intimately involved were hard pressed for words.

Sometimes words make things clearer—often words confuse things further.

Trying to say what we deeply mean, language can tangle us in seeming contradictions:

He’s a grizzly bear and a teddy bear. She’s the very picture of poetic prose.

Descriptions like that may be logically nonsensical—but deeply true.

With close-to-home truths, the language of paradox can be the only way to come anywhere close.

In one of his book, C. S. Lewis tells of an interchange between two colleagues.

One was trying to recount a profound personal experience to the other, with little success.

Trying to be helpful, the listener said, *Well, I guess it all must have been rather vague.*

The story teller shot back: *On the contrary! It was the clearest awareness I’ve ever had.*

Language—that’s what’s vague!

If you’ve ever been gifted with a great love, or suffered a great loss and tried to find words for it; you know the frustration.

- 2) In experiences of wonder, ecstasy, anguish we often fall silent—that’s no bad thing.

(A little silence would go a long way in Washington DC.)

Yet we *do* need to speak of what, in the end, our words can only *gesture* toward.

In settings of joy, sorrow, frustration, illumination words play two important roles:

- However faintly, words do shine light on the landscape in which we find ourselves.
- And, by illuminating the mystery, words move us into that mystery more deeply still.

Language functions as a search light.

As the bright center of the light beam progressively widens,
the penumbra, the area in shadow, grows broader still.

You can never describe a friend or lover, son or daughter, a vocational passion,
a moral conviction, or any bold, big new idea fully and completely.

But . . . in none of these close-to-home experiences is it enough just to say: Oh, *THAT!*

- 3) Sunday after Sunday we gesture toward God who is our deepest home—
the one in whom “we live and move and have our being”—

we name that source and center of our being with a familiar phrase:

Father, Son, Holy Spirit—One God.

Trying to indicate that God is not exclusively or even primarily male,

we sometimes substitute phrases like *Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier*

There is a gain in such translations—and a loss as well.

4) *Father, Son, Holy Spirit*

Why has the Christian community through the ages continually resorted to such language?
One God—fine; Three Gods—not impossible to envision.

But one is not three, and three is not one, no matter how you do the math.

So why do we keep using the phrase? Why do theological professionals write volumes about it?

Why, trying to wrap our mind around the mystery, do we resort to one metaphor after another:

- The Trinity is like water—liquid, solid, and gas.
- The Trinity is like St. Patrick's shamrock—a three leaf clover.
- The Trinity is like a triangle composed of sides that are individual but inseparable.
- The Trinity is like being a parent, a cousin, and a son or daughter at the same time

Oh, I get it! is a frequent first response to such suggestions; quickly followed by:

When I stop and think about it, that doesn't really help.

Repeated over and over: *Father, Son, Holy Spirit*"

can begin to sound like simply saying: *Oh, THAT!*

So, on this one Sunday of the year, we come to a full stop, and ask ourselves:

Father, Son, Holy Spirit—What's WITH that?

The challenge, of course, is to gesture toward an experience of God

that is not just "close to home," but "Home Itself"—

and to do so without getting lost in our language

as we try to describe where—in God's name—we truly find ourselves.

5) What's quite clear is this: those who use the language of *Father, Son, Holy Spirit*,
and who try to explain this language,

are not clueless about, or simply thumbing their noses at the canons of reasoned discourse.

We employ, and reflect upon Trinitarian language because, however paradoxical it sounds,
it gestures toward what we do encounter when we are closest to HOME.

However ultimate, awesome, almighty, unfathomable God may be,

the face of God, our language insists, is NOT like the face of an exalted potentate

whose gaze, if it reaches us at all, is only intent on seeing that we do his bidding—or else.

Nor is an encounter with God like getting lost in a sea of faces—

no face identifiable because all faces look the same.

We do have such experiences sometimes—

People with imperious, authoritarian faces

People with empty, nondescript faces

Our encounters with such people are seldom happy ones.

But, with God, we do not face a solitary being whose identity

is all wrapped up in power as entitlement and prerogative:

I'm in charge, I have a right to what I want, and I'll do what it takes to get it.

Nor is our experience of God that of a bland, faceless, bureaucratic abstraction:

To who it may concern, from no one in particular.

To experience God as One is not to encounter a rugged individualist,

It is not to encounter the oneness of lovers who have eyes only for each other.

To find ourselves at home in God is to find ourselves identified

with the individuality of an closely knit community,

a community where each member's individuality is recognized only

as it honors, and is honored by the individuality of all the others;

a community where identity is constituted by graceful interplay.

- 6) That's what the author of today's reading from Proverbs is trying to gesture toward. Coming as he does from ancient Hebrew tradition, he is not a card-carrying Trinitarian. But this uncompromising monotheist—this believer in ONE God, talks about the unfolding of creation as a back-and-forth between the World's Creator and a Woman called Wisdom. Listen again:
I was beside him, like a master worker, Wisdom says, and I was daily God's delight. Rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world, and delighting in the human race.

In the parts of the proverb we did not read this morning,
Lady Wisdom urges the rest of us, to dive on in to this dance of creative divine delight.

- 7) Trying to describe what it means for all of us to be swept into the center of God's creative energy, St. Paul talks about the peace of God that pours both *into*, and *forth from* Jesus Christ, about the love of God that pours into *our* hearts by way of the Holy Spirit. Notice how Paul, who often parses concepts like a legal eagle, here resorts, like the author of Proverbs, to the vivid pulsing language of action verbs--POUR. It's as if he's saying, *You want a definition of the Trinity? You're gonna get soaked. But come on in; the water's fine; you are in for the swim of your life!*

- 8) Jesus' words to his disciples in John's Gospel are very frustrating and confusing if what we hope to find, by listening in on the conversation between Jesus and his friends, is a formula we can use to sort out *who is who* by *which* does *what*,
All that the Father has is MINE, says Jesus.

The Spirit will identify me, by taking what is mine and offering it with YOU.

Complex and mysterious though God may be, you see, "This is me and mine alone"—that is never a divine credential.

God' distinctive being is grounded and experienced in God's welcoming and bestowing, in God's listening and responding, in God's giving and giving and giving.

This is Good News--News that, at the deepest level, you and I long to hear.

But in a world where the meaning of personal identity is so often so bound up with possession and entitlement—*this is mine, it isn't yours*—this word from Jesus about the fundamental nature of God as Trinity, God as communal compassion—this is a truth toward which we reach out in gesture.

It is also a truth that (as Jesus says), we may not *now* be able to *bear*, but *into* which, by God's spirit, we will gently but surely be *led*.

- 9) There is, I have to say, one discordant note in this sonorous music.

It comes (no surprise) from St. Paul, who is as well known for sounding discordant notes as he is for parsing concepts. Listen:

We boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God—We BOAST.

That sure does sound like *We're number one!* does it not?

And that doesn't resonate at all well—does it—with the character of God as Trinity we have just been trying to gesture toward—

divinity as irreducibly compassionate, communal unity:

We BOAST. . . Our experience of a benevolent divine being, Paul seems to say, *is one, that beats other people's experiences of God, whatever they may be..*

That NOT a paradox, that IS a contradiction.

But the problem here, one more time,

is not the experience of God, but the vagueness of language.

The word “boast” is a poor translation of St. Paul’s Greek.

The word Paul uses does not mean “to brag,” to puff yourself up by putting others down.

The Greek word translated BOAST means “rejoice in full confidence, celebrate, delight in.

We rejoice, we celebrate, we delight in our hope of sharing the glory of God.

Made, as we are, in God’s own image

And finding our home, as we do, in a God who, at heart, is communal compassion—

in good times or in bad, come what may,

we are totally immersed in the divine dance of creation.

Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty—God in Three Persons, Blessed Trinity.