

Where words and numbers fail

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It seems a little backward on the Sunday after Pentecost to receive instructions that have already been successfully carried out. Peter and the disciples blew them away last week, preaching up a storm of fire and spirit like a host of Rosetta Stone experts. But today we go back to the place where Jesus told them what to do: Go and make disciples.

Of course, the reason we're reading the end of Matthew this week is because it's Trinity Sunday. This text is one of the few places we can manufacture a scriptural representation of a Council decision that awaits these nascent Christians roughly three hundred years in the future. We've become so used to the concept of *De Trinitate*—thank you Augustine, *et al.*—that we assume scripture is rife with it. Not so much. Biblically, the Trinity is more inference than reference.

Still, it's important not to limit God. God makes this clear in the evasive linguistics offered to Moses. God, the “wholly other,” self-named by “to be” verbs (writing instructors shudder), becomes an action verb in the particular person of Jesus of Nazareth—teaching, healing, feeding, dying, rising. The uniting force of these disparate verbs shimmers at the edges of our peripheral vision; it disappears from sight as soon as we turn to stare straight at it. We call the uniting force Spirit, and we try to describe it with nouns like wind, breath, presence, mystery.

In the end, the Trinity is beyond words, whether verbs or nouns. Centuries of Christian teaching subsequently suggest that one way to understand it is through a mathematical formula that does not add up: $1+1+1=1$. Where words capture only in part, arithmetic fails completely.

And so we are left, in the end, with faith. Inexplicable mystery, wondrous grace, unbounded love. With that we go out to make disciples.