

June 16, Trinity C (John 16:12-15)

## **To know any truth about God, we must be drawn into the life of the Trinity. But how?**

by [Evan D. Garner](#) in the [June 5, 2019](#) issue

In my first year of seminary, our study group wrapped up the fall semester by drawing names and playing Secret Santa. Although it's designed to be a friendly game in which individuals anonymously give gifts of a set value, something always seems to go wrong. Indeed, when I opened my gift, I struggled to hide my dismay. I held in my hands a children's book on Trinitarian theology, and, without even turning to the first page, I could already tell that it was heresy.

In particular, the book espoused modalism. By using the three phases of water—ice, liquid, and steam—as an analogy for the three persons of the Holy Trinity, the book collapsed the three distinct persons of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—into three modes of the same entity. It was not as bad as Arianism, perhaps, but it was close. I forced a smile. “How cute . . . and helpful!” I blurted out unconvincingly.

I should not fault the author of the book or the person who gave it to me. Whether speaking to a child or a colleague or a congregation, how else can someone explain the Trinity except by appealing to a heretical analogy? Each year as Trinity Sunday approaches, a video appears in my Facebook news feed from the people at Lutheran Satire in which an icon of St. Patrick tries to convey the complex doctrine of the Holy Trinity. I joyfully watch it every time. After repeatedly failing to find a heresy-free analogy, the exasperated saint proclaims, “The Trinity is a mystery which cannot be comprehended by human reason but is understood only through faith.” In other words, God cannot be understood but must be encountered through a relationship that grows from faith.

In this week's Gospel reading, Jesus says to his disciples, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.” Although it is his last night with them and he is running out of time to teach them, the issue is not the ticking clock. According to Jesus, the problem is the disciples. They cannot bear what he would

convey to them in this moment. John's use of the Greek verb βαρύνω (to bear) implies more than just mental comprehension. In this case, to bear is to carry or to accept a burden of understanding that, in the classroom-like setting of the Last Supper, the disciples are not yet in a position to take on. The truth that Jesus would have them know must be learned through the experience of the passion, death, and resurrection that wait for them in the days ahead.

In part, the fullness that Jesus has in mind can only be glimpsed on the other side of Easter. Even at the Last Supper, the disciples' ability to understand who Jesus really is—the one who washes their feet, the one who goes where they cannot follow—remains incomplete. Only after discovering the empty tomb and encountering the risen Christ will Peter and the other disciples begin to believe fully in him. But the issue is more than seeing evidence of a great miracle. All through the Gospel account, Jesus' disciples have witnessed incredible signs that demonstrate Jesus' true identity as the Son of God. Yet they, like us, need more than a convincing proof. They need to be led into the truth by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus reassures the disciples that the Spirit will guide them into that truth. Again, John uses a particular word for the Spirit's action, implying that the Spirit will not merely teach (διδάσκω) the disciples but will lead or guide (ὁδηγέω) them. This is the same kind of guidance that the divine shepherd offers God's people when leading them to the springs of the water of life in Revelation 7:17. By leading them experientially into the truth, the Spirit shows Jesus' followers what Jesus alone cannot effectively say to them, and because the Spirit discloses only what it hears—just as Jesus, the Son, has spoken only what the Father has declared to him—that which is to be revealed is of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. In short, all knowledge of God is given to us by the Trinity.

There is still so much that Jesus wants to say to us, but we cannot bear it until we, too, are led and guided and formed by a life lived in the Holy Spirit. We must be drawn into the divine life of the Holy Trinity before we can know any truth about God.

How does that happen? As demonstrated at Pentecost, the Spirit's first work is to speak to us and through us in prayer. Sarah Coakley writes in *God, Sexuality, and the Self* that Spirit-led prayer, as a “naked dispossession before God” that is usually manifest either in charismatic utterances or wordless silence, is “the ascetical [test] of contemplation without which no epistemic or spiritual deepening can start to

occur.” As our faith in God deepens, we discover that we cannot say anything true about God; we can only listen.

As the lectionary cycle again brings us to Trinity Sunday, we are reminded by Jesus that the truth of God is something that we cannot convey or receive in words. Instead, knowledge of God is a gift that depends on the one who gives it by leading us to a place where we can receive it. That journey is the journey of faith. Knowing the truth of who God is, therefore, begins with a relationship with the one who is relational, the one who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.