
Letters to a Young Episcopalian: The Trinity

This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.

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Dear Anna,

I understand your frustration with what we call the doctrine of the trinity. Even if you accept the logic of the metaphors that we often employ to explain it—like the three forms of water: liquid, ice, and vapor—it can still leave you dry and thirsty. It's hard to accept it as the revealed truth about God when it doesn't seem to say anything meaningful about your life.

I think, though, that the relationships between the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit do say something important to us about the character of human life. They reveal a pattern that can be transforming if we allow it to shape our lives. But, as is true with much of what we say about God, it has to be experienced before it can be believed.

Anne Maxwell, an Episcopalian priest, tells a wonderful story about the birth of her son that illustrates this pattern.

A friend told her that one of the great things about having a child was how it changed the relationship you have with your partner. "You think you couldn't love more than you do now," he said, "but wait until you have this child. It's not just that you will love this child but you will be blown away by how you feel when you see your husband holding your baby. I didn't know I could love my wife that much."

Anne came to relish the moments when she could watch her husband doing something simple with their son, like reading a book, playing with Legos, or washing the boat. She could sense their awareness of each other. They were connected without having to touch or look at each other.

Here's the point, though.

Their love for each other touched her. It inspired her to love more – not only her son and his father, but also other people.

Anne's story reminds me of the promise that Jesus made to his disciples. "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth" (John 16:12).

Abstractions by themselves, however well-metaphored, lack the power to give us new life. It is the Spirit that will guide us into all truth.

I am often surprised, however, by how often those things that inspire me to love more have a trinitarian character.

I wonder if that is true for you too.

Your affectionate uncle,
Ames

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