

Trinity Sunday. May 30, 2021.  
The Rev. Deborah Woolsey.

**Trinity Math**  
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

A few years ago the National Geographic Channel aired a series called *The Story of God* that explored aspects, practices, and origins of many religions, including Christianity. It was an interesting series, but what I remember it for was the episode that introduced me to someone who passionately spoke about how he sees God in - of all things - mathematics.

His name is Ard Louis, and he is Professor of Theoretical Physics at Oxford University. The intention of the episode was to explore how religious people attempt to prove the existence of God. Professor Louis stood out to me because of how he approached belief in God. Instead of engaging in competitive analogy, Louis talked about the sense of awe and wonder he experiences in nature and how the order found in nature, like the veins in a leaf, point to the existence of God. He went on to speak with energy about an equation called the Dirac equation which predicted antimatter and the behavior of particles at high energy and velocity before they were confirmed by observation four years after British physicist Paul Dirac discovered the equation that bears his name. This equation inspires Professor Louis because in that equation, specifically, in the relationships between the numbers that make up the equation, he sees the same beauty of awe and wonder that points to the existence of God that he sees in nature.

He's not the only mathematician to experience God in mathematical equations. Japanese author Yoko Ogawa's beautiful novel *The Housekeeper and the Professor* features a fictional professor who experiences God in the relationships between numbers. We learn this professor is not interested in merely coming up with right answers, but in the journey, in the process of finding what he called an elegant solution. When he had a rare moment of solving an equation elegantly, as he described it, he gave credit to God, saying God opened God's notebook to reveal truth. This characteristic of the fictional professor is how he is able to have meaningful relationships with people in his life while struggling with a head injury that left him unable to remember anything for longer than eighty minutes.

These two professors experiencing God in what they described as elegance or beauty in mathematical equations were the first time I have heard a mathematician talk like that. Their experience of God in the relationship between numbers was a new, intriguing, and beautiful concept for me. Especially because I am not someone well versed in the language or practice of math. I understand how some people are turned on by the beauty of a well written phrase or sentence or story. I had no idea there are people who experience math in that same way.

When it came to trying to use math or science to prove the existence of God, Professor Louis said that was the wrong approach. Much like Christian writer and intellectual Francis Spufford wrote, Louis believes God is not part of the universe, and therefore not subject to its laws and limitations. God, for example, is not a bigger, smarter, more complex version of ourselves existing in the confines of the universe that we can go looking for like a planet or a particle. Instead, God is what the whole universe exists in. Therefore attempting to prove God's existence through science is futile.

However, Professor Louis believed we can know God does exist like we know we are loved or love someone else. Love can't be proven like a formula, only observed as people grow in love over time, whether that is love of spouses, siblings, friends, or parents and children, or families. It's all in the beauty of the relationship.

Professor Louis' approach to understanding the existence of God is a lovely way to approach today's observance of Trinity Sunday. Once a year, always on the Sunday after Pentecost Sunday, the Church gives us a day to reflect on the doctrine that is unique to Christianity that is Three distinct Persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) in One God. Over the thousands of years of the Church's existence, people in the Church have struggled to understand and explain this doctrine. Some explanations have been dismissed as heresies (a word that means false teaching). Many a preacher has attempted to use this Sunday to try and teach the doctrine of the Trinity. And there is nothing wrong with that approach; except that I wonder if maybe it misses the point, like trying to prove the existence of God.

Biblical scholars and commentators point out the word *trinity* does not appear anywhere in the Bible. However, what does appear repeatedly in both the Old and New Testaments are people's experience of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Perhaps Trinity Sunday isn't so much about proving the Trinity doctrine as it is about attempting to share how real our experience of God is.

For Professor Louis, that experience happens in the relationships in mathematical equations. For others it might be in the relationship between written words. Or in relationships between people, or in the relationships between notes of music. Trinity Sunday can be a time to listen to and learn from the experiences of others and humbly admit God is much more than our preferred depiction of God. At its best, Trinity Sunday is an invitation to engage in the practice of Holy Imagination, letting God be God instead of limiting God to our definition as a form of proof.

I have never imagined what it would be like to experience God in a mathematical equation. Mostly because math wasn't my strongest subject in school, and I did not enjoy it. Math was a chore, something I had to get through with a decent grade. And the question I asked most often of my math teachers was, "When am I ever going to use this in the real world"? Now I regret to say I never saw the beauty in math. I didn't realize I had missed the opportunity to come close to God and for God to come close to me every time I worked on math homework. Professor Louis's reasoning makes sense to me. If the universe exists in God, then there isn't any part of the universe where God isn't. That means God can be anywhere and everywhere, even in math.

What sounds especially Trinitarian to me is experiencing God in the relationship between the numbers in mathematical equations. Because that is how I imagine the Trinity: God is love, and love is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and love is the relationship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God wants to give us this love and create a relationship with us. This love is the self-sacrificing love Jesus showed us in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. This love doesn't pit person against person in competition for power and importance. It is the perfect equality, one that does not deny personhood but makes it part of the one whole.

The intellectuals who know the specifics of those Trinitarian heresies I mentioned earlier might remember what made the idea or analogy a false teaching was it lifted one Person of the Trinity over the others. Trinity isn't a reflection of our sinful striving for power or competition for resources or attention. Trinity does not need to prove who is in charge. Trinity is the perfect love and equality that casts out sin and carries each other.

If you ever wonder what the Kingdom of Heaven looks like, or what the Beloved Community is like, look no further than the Trinity. To the love that carries each other through all of life, that makes room for one another and leave no one behind.

Another aspect of Trinity is we are invited into this love. We can see this invitation in all of the Bible readings for today. God is not separate and apart from the world, as we read in John's Gospel, God loves the world - or universe - so much God gave God's own self to it. This observable selfless act of love in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and gift of the Holy Spirit, is intended to engage in the universe like mathematicians engage in a complex equation, to become part of the elegance and beautiful experience of being in relationship with the universe and those of us who inhabit it. That is just another way to say God sent Jesus to give us eternal life. Eternity isn't a cold number too big to be part of an equation, but the elegant holy equation itself that makes room for us all, even, and especially those students who struggled with math.

This Trinity Sunday has me looking at math differently. I appreciate it and those who love it more than I did. Because now I can imagine God is in the equations, even if I don't understand them. I hope this Trinity Sunday opens your heart and mind and soul to the infinite and eternal possibilities God is present to you and inspires you to notice the beauty that points to God and to engage in that perfect love that carries us closer together to that elegant Trinitarian equation that is God's Kingdom where even math is beautiful.