

**CHEMISTRY LESSON**  
*Sermon for Trinity (Pentecost 1B) – Jn 3:1-17*  
LPC, 6/7/09

Theology is like chemistry.

You know what theology is, don't you? Theology is the study of God and of things related to God. To look at things theologically is to look at them as they are related to God. Thus it is possible to look at just about anything theologically.

So how is theology like chemistry? For one thing, some people are really good at chemistry, and many people are not good at chemistry. Theology is like that.

Some people do well studying chemistry at school. They may make chemistry their life's work. Some pursue chemistry's practical uses in medicine, industry or even household products. Others do research in chemistry, discovering more and more about our physical world and uncovering potential future uses for chemistry.

Meanwhile, most of us take our morning meds, or clean our houses or simply observe the way things relate to each other in the world. Most of us usually don't think about chemistry's role in all these areas. When we do think about chemistry, we accept that most of it's beyond us. We don't have to understand everything about chemistry to understand that chemicals underlie most of our lives. We can accept that fact without completely understanding how, or needing to understand.

Theology is like that. Human beings conduct the business of their lives without often thinking of the theology that underlies the world's activities. Some human beings reject the idea of theology underlying anything. But we are believers here. We are Christians. We don't always think about theology, but when we do, we accept that theology underlies our lives in ways that we don't always understand.

I offer all of this as an introduction to talking about Trinitarian theology: the theology of the Trinity. I don't usually preach sermons that are mostly about doctrine, but today is Trinity Sunday, which suggests a discussion of Trinitarian doctrine.

The theology of the Trinity is the way Christians talk about God. Christians say that there is only one God, but that contained in the Godhead (that is to say, the wholeness of God) there are three "persons:" Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The word "persons" unfortunately is totally inadequate, being the best the English language can offer in translation of a doctrine originally formulated in Greek and thoroughly dissected in Latin. Even without this linguistic problem, Trinitarian theology is difficult.

The level of its difficulty is attested by the fact that Trinitarian theology was not officially adopted by the Christian Church to the exclusion of other doctrines about God until three centuries after Christ lived. Since that time, this doctrine's difficulty is further

attested by the fact that a number of groups have reacted against orthodox Christianity, specifically rejecting Trinitarianism: Muslims, Unitarians, and Mormons, to name a few.

Sure, Trinitarian theology is difficult: as difficult as a complicated chemical formula. That doesn't make it unreal or untrue.

If you have difficulty getting your head around the idea the Trinity, consider Nicodemus, in today's gospel story from John. Nicodemus cannot get his head around the idea of being born from above, as Jesus says he must be. Jesus counters by mentioning the wind, a phenomenon which no one sees and which a person may not fully comprehend, but whose existence no one doubts, because we have the evidence of its movements.

The Trinity is like the wind, or like a complicated chemical formula. We don't have to fully comprehend it to accept the evidence of its movements. There is this difference of course: meteorologists do understand the wind, and chemists do understand their formulas, but absolutely no one fully understands the Trinity.

Here, however, is a very simplified explanation. The Father pours himself out in love into the Son. The Son in perfect obedience returns that love. The Spirit swirls about them both, perfectly uniting them in love. To paraphrase St. Augustine: The Trinity consists of Lover, Beloved, and Love itself.

God thus is, Godself, a community, a cosmic unity of love, as stable, dynamic and infinitely powerful as a single atom. When God creates humans in God's image, God creates them to live in community and love with each other, just as God lives in community and in love with Godself, in stability, dynamic creativity and infinite power.

I may have lost some of you there, just as my chemistry teacher lost me about halfway through tenth grade. It doesn't matter. I don't have to understand the formulas about God when I see the evidence of God's movements.

Some of that evidence is provided by Holy Scripture. Holy Scripture, in both Old and New Testaments, describes a God of such dynamism and complexity that only a doctrine as dynamic and complex as the Trinity could even begin to sort-of-approximately-aspire to describing what God is like.

Speaking of dynamism, there's one more point of similarity between chemistry and theology. Human understanding of chemistry continues to evolve. When I was in high school, we were taught about atoms being protons and neutrons joined in a nucleus while electrons swirled about them in orbits. Now I understand that model is obsolete.

Theology evolves too. Theologians come up with new models that better fit what we know as human beings live longer and gather more information. This happens with individuals too. We may have to discard our antiquated images of God as we live longer and experience God in new ways. We don't have to be theologians. Or chemists. Just lovers.