

On Vulnerability and Mystery

Leaning to be vulnerable is a difficult thing. Just think about the messages that many of us heard as children, or still hear today: “Be strong”. “Don’t be so emotional.” “Boys don’t cry.” I would guess that most of us have heard some variation of those phrases. And they all share something in common: the belief that being open, emotional, humble, or vulnerable is a sign of weakness. Even with the rapid social changes that have occurred, we still live in a world that operates with the assumption that ‘Might makes right.’ Power is still measured by who makes it out on top...who’s in charge...who is in control. Entertain me for a moment. Raise your hand if you would feel completely comfortable and at ease with standing up, right now, and sharing your darkest secrets, your secret fears, or the marks of the true self that lie buried underneath your public persona? Just as I thought. Like I said, vulnerability is a difficult thing.

Perhaps you are out there wondering just what in the world any of this has to do with the holy and undivided Trinity. Who knows, by the end of this sermon, you still might be wondering that. But stick with me anyhow. For all of the dogmatic theology that has been written these last two millennia, for all of the rationalization done to make the Trinity sensible, for all of the unbelievably bad analogies out there for the Trinity, I remain convinced of this one truth: the Trinity is a mystery, a living reality that requires vulnerability rather than intellectual prowess if one is to enter into relationship with this mystery and truly be transformed by divine grace. Now, let me repeat that. The Trinity is a mystery, a living reality that requires vulnerability rather than intellectual prowess if one is to enter into relationship with this mystery and truly be transformed by divine grace. In short, this is a mystery that makes very little sense. And that is okay. In fact, it’s how it should be.

This doctrine, the belief in a Trinity of persons in perfect divine Unity...it's a fool's errand to make logical and rational sense of it. It simply cannot be done. True, we can, and we have, formulated doctrinal statements about the Trinitarian nature of God. But to be frank, what good is doctrine if it amounts to nothing more than linguistic constructs and semantic riddles? Good doctrine forms us, shapes us, enables us to experience the inexhaustible depth of God in ways that transform us, that leave us breathless in the face of this Mystery. We are not called to circumscribe God within our linguistic formulas. We are called to stand before the great depth of the mystery that is God and worship, love, and adore that which we cannot fully comprehend.

And very few people have plumbed the depth of this mystery in such profound ways as Mechthild of Magdeburg, a 13th century mystic. Nearly ten years after I first encountered her writings, I can't shake her vision of God: "The brightest of lights opened up to the eyes of my soul. In it I saw the indescribable order and recognized the inexpressible glory, the incomprehensible marvel, the special intimacy...There also four beams were visible that shot forth continuously from the crossbow of the Holy Trinity from the divine throne through the nine choirs. There is no one, however rich or poor, whom the beam does not strike lovingly. The beam of the Godhead shoots incomprehensible light through them. Loving humanity touches them with the flood of the marvelous abundance of eternal bliss. Undivided God feeds them with the shimmer of his glorious countenance and fills them with joyful breath of his flowing mouth...The Godhead rings, Humanity sings, the Holy Spirit plucks the harp of the heavens."

Here, in this most sublime account of transcendental spiritual experience, Mechthild is allowed a glimpse of God in God's heavenly abode. Not simply a vision seen through an anthropomorphic lens, like the theophanies of the Old Testament, Mechthild gazes upon God in God's economy, above the immanence of traditional earthly encounters. Mechthild's conception of the Trinity is particularly inviting because she emphasizes the fluid and vibrant nature of the

Godhead. This is a fluidity marked by God's constant flowing out into the world, inviting creation to participate with God in intimate and transcendental ways. As in the aforementioned vision, the Godhead pierces creation with the light from God's being as Jesus, representing the humanity of God, elevates human nature into participation with the "marvelous abundance of eternal bliss." Mechthild's conception of the Trinity as ringing, singing, and plucking further emphasizes the active and fluid nature of the Trinity, insofar as sound and music is ever expanding, drawing its hearers into a reciprocal relationship of call and response. The "joyful breath of [God's] flowing mouth" that once called creation into existence now calls creation into a deeper and more intimate relationship of mutuality and exchange.

It's this relationship...this participation with the marvelous abundance of eternal bliss...this sense of absolute adoration and love that should overwhelm us when we ponder the mysteries of God. This isn't to suggest that our intellects are never a means of experiencing God. But when we come face to face with a mystery we cannot possibly exhaust, it's time to set aside our intellectual prowess and give ourselves over to the mystery out of a deep sense of vulnerable humility and trust. Is this not the attitude of some of the disciples: "The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted." They all worshiped him, even while some of them still doubted the truth of his identity. Belief, in moments like these, is more like trust. An attitude of trust, dependence, even if we don't fully understand the mystery. Even in our acts of worship, we may have doubt about what we believe, but nevertheless we recognize the limitations of our understanding. We trust, we love, we adore...even if we can't quite wrap our heads around the object of our adoration.

In a way, this isn't too dissimilar from what it means to love another person. When I was 22 years old, riding in the back of my parents' car on a visit home from seminary, they asked me,

“Do you love Karen?” And before my mind could wrap itself around the concept of love, even before I could think of all the reasons why I should or should not be in love with her, the deepest part of my being answered, “Yes. And I want to marry her.” 10 years later, after spending 8 of those in marriage, I can say beyond a shadow of a doubt that I don’t know everything about Karen. Our conversations, our experiences...none of those things have brought me to a place where I can say that I fully understand my wife. And yet I love her still, I love her more than I did even in those days. I will always be learning about her, coming to know her more, and yet I will never know her fully. But I love her nevertheless.

The same with my son. I can remember what it was like to hear his heartbeat for the first time. I wept, my breath stolen from me by the intoxicating sound of his life. I was the first one to see him born, the first one to touch him, to hold him. All I knew was that he was my son. I knew nothing of his personality, what he was to be like, what kind of boy he would be, or what kind of man he would grow into. I loved him. And when I rubbed my beard on his feet in the nursery of that hospital, there was a connection between us that transcends words. It was love, mystical, mysterious, and beyond all rational faculties.

And all of this hinges on vulnerability, on giving ourselves over to mysteries deep and beyond our comprehension. “In the jubilus of the Holy Trinity,” Mechthild says, “when God could no longer contain himself, he created the soul and, in his immense love, gave himself to her as her own...I was made by love in that very place. For that reason no creature is able to give comfort to my noble nature or to open it up except love alone.” Friends, don’t waste your time trying to understand the Trinity. Respond to the intoxicating allure of its mystery, and spend your days loving this mysterious God, Three in One, that first loved you.