



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea

*The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida*

**TRINITY
SUNDAY**

JUNE 15, 2025

A Sermon by the Rev. James J. Popham

As a young Catholic child in parochial school, I was taught by the nuns (n-u-n-s, not “nones”) that we were created by God to know, love, and serve God. Now in late adulthood, I hope I have a decent grasp on loving and serving God. But knowing God, well, that seems a stretch. We may know enough about God. Indeed, when one is ordained to the priesthood, one must declare that [they]

[B]elieve the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, and to contain all things necessary to salvation...

(BCP at 526). And in the Nicene Creed, which resides in the bedrock of our rich tradition, we subscribe to an understanding of God that took almost 400 years to develop and which we will once again honor in just a few minutes. And that understanding of God is expressed most fully in the doctrine of the Trinity that we celebrate today.

But the creed represents the problem we have when we try to articulate an understanding of God. We are not God. As one of our favorite seminary professors stated so it's not me."

We are mere humans. We are blessed with memory, reason, and skill. But that is a far cry from being capable of fully understanding God. And further still from describing God within the confines of human language. But that is the best we can do.

Now I spent my first semester in seminary too embarrassed to ask what a metaphor was. Because every class lecture was littered with metaphors as a way to understand God and Scripture and, seemingly, all the secrets of the universe. Now for those of us who never were in Miss Whittington's honors English class, a metaphor, according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, available online, is

A figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them.¹

Got it? Let's try this definition from the LitCharts website:

A metaphor is a figure of speech that compares two different things by saying that one thing is the other.²

Are you still awake? Are you with me? Because this is important.

The comparisons created by metaphor are not meant to be taken literally.³

God as Father, the old man with the white beard that bears a passing resemblance to Santa Claus. Not so much. Jesus as Lamb of God, along with over 30 other metaphors in Scripture. Jesus is not a lamb or a shepherd, Good or otherwise, and then how could he both lamb and shepherd? God as Holy Spirit or Holy Ghost. Who we gonna call? If we take these metaphors literally, we severely diminish God and, as is obvious, turn God into a bad joke. We used to joke in seminary that God must be tired of being a metaphor, but they tell us so much. And that is the beauty of the Trinity. It enables us to understand God despite the limits of human intellect and language. Maybe not fully or completely, but enough. And enough is so much.

Now this is a lot more important than parsing the shades of theological doctrine. Metaphors put boundaries on our understanding of God. They rein us in when we begin to create God in our image or in ways convenient to our ever self-serving understandings of God: The god who judges others, but not us, harshly without compassion or mercy. The god who pushes us over the line from righteous to self-righteous. The god who says we are better than our neighbor for whatever reason that redounds to our benefit. The god who wants us to be rich and famous. The god who says we can condemn, oppress, and exploit others who fail to understand God the way we do. The god who appoints us gods with all the power and the glory, but no understanding of who God really is and who we are.

After all, we are made in the image of God. Without knowing God, how can we know ourselves? And if we fail to understand who we are as God's image, how can we know how to love or serve God, our neighbors, or even

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/metaphor>.

² <https://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/metaphor>.

³ *Id.*

ourselves. And, here again, it's the metaphors that show us the way, as limited as they may be.

God as parent reveals the nature of God's love for us, a parental love that is instinctual, unceasing, unconditional, unreserved. A love that nurtures and guides. A new father recently described fatherhood so well as

A fatherhood not of directing and controlling, but of accompanying. Not only of teaching, but also of learning....of paying attention to what the people we care for asking us to do and be: a fatherhood of listening.⁴

So when we describe God as father, mother, or parent, we understand God as present with us, listening to our prayers, hearing our needs, but never controlling us. Just showing us how to be God's image: caring, listening, accompanying, being present to others. Hearing needs. Seeing needs. Responding to needs. And loving with abandon.

God as creator reminds us that even as creatures, we are creators. Of course, humans procreate, but how much of God's beauty and truth is expressed in art and music and literature and film and drama. In architecture and construction, in skyscrapers and cathedrals, in laboratories and kitchens, even in churches. We are the conduits of God's love to the world, so we better have a firm understanding of how and how much God loves us.

And then we have Jesus, who gave us the greatest example of self-sacrificial love the world has ever known. The Jesus who showed us how to be human, but also Godly. The Jesus we call God's son, who showed us how to be a true child of God. The Jesus who nurtured and taught and healed and loved as the Father loves him to show us how to love our neighbors – and ourselves – as God loves us.

And then the Holy Spirit. Let's be clear the Holy Spirit is not a ghost or a dove or a tongue of fire. Yes, the Holy Spirit is an ephemeral presence, unseen, but sometimes so present it is overwhelming. And other times, maybe in a tiny detail of life that we would not note in passing unless we were really paying attention. But always a presence of God that we cannot escape, only ignore. A presence of God that sustains and sanctifies our lives. And a source of spiritual gifts that make us the sanctified, Godly, persons

⁴ Augustine Sedgewick, "Why Do Dads Want to Be Gods When They Can Just Be Good Huggers?," *The New York Times*, June 14, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/14/opinion/fatherhood-model-history.html> (accessed June 14, 2025).

we are called to be: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord. And let's be clear. Fear of the Lord is a miserable translation from the King James version of the Bible. We should not be scared...even of the Holy Ghost.

Fear of the Lord is better understood as "deep awareness of God's otherness" or "being in awe of the Creator's majestic work."⁵

My dear friends in Christ, the Trinity reminds us that we are part of God's majestic work. And God's work is no small honor or responsibility. So we need to know the God in whose image we are made. Contrary then to the billboard on the cover of the bulletin, many of which we have seen in recent travels, the Trinity is not idolatry, but a gift from the prayerful musings of the Church's fathers and councils centuries ago. It is a metaphorical understanding of God that not only reveals enough about God, and just as much about who we are, and moreover, the Godly souls we have been created and called to be.

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⁵ <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/jeffertsschori/fear-not-for-god-is-with-us-presiding-bishop-says-in-easter-vigil-sermon/>.