

Today is about triangles but we are going to have to get there in a triangular fashion.

Triangles are on my mind because at the end of September I will be leading the Diocesan Church Development Institute as part of my job for the Diocese. Triangles abound in this program, triangles that are models for how we can think about our life together as a community.

The most important triangle we call the Christian Life model. You see here that it is comprised of Worship, Doctrine, and Action.

Gathering together in worship is what we do as a people who have been called out. Worship itself has three components: the Holy Eucharist, in which we receive the body of Christ and become the body of Christ, the Daily Office which is what you experienced in Morning Prayer last week but can also be said privately by an individual, and then Personal Devotions – those things that we do as a personal discipline that bring us closer to God – for some it might be reading Forward Day-by-Day, for others it might be prayer beads, or journaling, or praying while drawing, or sewing, or gardening, all those things that we do that free up our minds to focus on God.

The next point in our primary triangle is Doctrine. Doctrine is comprised of Scripture, Reason, and Tradition. Together these teach us about who God is and how to live in the world. Scripture is foundational but we don't apply scripture to everything: scripture is not a basis for understanding science, nor is it pure history based on provable facts, moreover it contains lots of things that can seem to contradict each other until we apply Reason, which is our God-given gift for discerning what makes sense in light of our experience. Some of this experience is distilled in the Tradition of the church, meaning how the church has experienced God throughout the ages, where it has been influenced by the Holy Spirit, as well as how the church has experienced itself as the body of Christ.

Lastly there's Action, meaning we can't just meditate on what we have heard we have to do something about it. Here Action is defined as Stewardship, Evangelism, and Service. Stewardship, as we will begin reminding you before too long is about more than money, it involves taking care of everything we have been given, the earth, it's creatures, the communities in which we find ourselves, the churches where we have been drawn to worship, and our families. Stewardship isn't just about keeping something safe; it is about growing what we have been given. This is what we do in Evangelism when we respond to God's call by sharing the Good News, not just but standing on street corners and handing out pamphlets but by showing whose we are by our behavior. Some of that behavior shows up in Service, in our ministries like the Food Pantry, the Soup Kitchen and the Thrift Shop, and the funds that we distribute to those in need.

A model like the Christian Life model is a simplified version of something more complex, and you can appreciate that even in this simplified form, the life of a church has a lot of moving parts. The priest and lay leaders need to understand how all of these elements come into balance to create a healthy environment that is open to growth and development. We use models to understand these dynamics and to do analysis, to solve problems, to develop capacities, and to help us to see a path of improvement.

The points of the triangle hold each other in tension, giving precedence to no one thing although one particular aspect might be emphasized more than another depending on the culture, the charism, and the context of a particular church but recognizing the importance of all three. For example St. Paul's does an amazing amount of outreach ministry for its size. Another church might be known for its Christian Formation programs, or for having an expansive youth ministry. We are to make the most with what we have and the gifts we have been given.

Today's lessons seem to offer another set of triangles, an Individual triangle, the way we are or are not shaped and guided by God for our life in the world. Our gospel speaks to our hearts, Deuteronomy to the teaching that is to guide our behavior, and James to the need to move from knowing to doing.

When Jesus is challenged by the Pharisees and the scribes because his disciples do not wash their hands before eating he accuses them of paying more attention to ritual, however sacred, than how the ritual is supposed to influence behavior. Washing hands does not reflect the condition of a person's heart. Jesus says "there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." That which defiles is not pooping. The digestive system has nothing to do with the heart. "For it is from within, from the human heart that evil intentions come." And then Jesus lists a whole bunch of bad stuff. And it is true. Our hearts, the seat of our desires, are easily perverted, easily led astray, and what is more we can project that evil onto others.

Fortunately God learned not to rely on the decisions of the human heart and provided some assistance in the form of the Law, or teaching called Torah. The word Torah describes not just laws but all of scripture contained in the first 5 books of the bible. These are the stories about God and who God is and how God relates to God's people, as well as specific commandments. The Law shapes a community and reveals the nature of the God who gave it. "For what other nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him. "And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?" Yes, God's concern for justice is what teaches us to look out for more than ourselves, to curb inclinations to envy, slander, pride, folly, and all those other evil intentions mentioned by Jesus. But the Law is not just about curbing appetites it is also to orienting our hearts and minds towards God that helps instill a love for good behavior.

In our reading from James we are reminded that the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Hearing God's word, believing that Jesus is the Son of God and that our salvation is dependent upon him, obeying God's laws by avoiding breaking them is nothing if we do not behave and act that way. James tells us to be doers of the word, and not merely hearers. I think if we look back at Action triangle naming stewardship, evangelism, and service we have a good idea of what James means. Certainly his last statement lays it out clearly. "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." That's what the Law was designed to do for the Jews, to remind of them that they are a people set apart to lead holy lives. As Christians, baptized into Christ's death and rising again we are to do the same. Our values do not always coincide with the values of the world, particularly the pursuit of justice and to care for those

who are vulnerable, not just widows and orphans, but the sick, the needy, veterans, the elderly, the foreigner, the prisoner, the addict - pretty much anyone who has trouble making it. So we have our work cut out for us.

We've looked at the triangles for community, we've looked at the triangle for the individual so now it's time for the most significant triangle – you know the one, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Three in one and one in three. The Holy Trinity. Three persons in mutual relationship, independent, not limited by function or attribute yet of one substance. Listen to the words of the Nicene Creed as we recite it today. It's all there, everything we need to know to trust God and to hope for the future. Above all it is the grace of the God who creates, redeems, and sustains us that gives meaning to our lives and life to our communities.

So there you have it: triangles God, Self, and Community. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end,

Amen.