

## 2022-06-12 Des Moines First UMC - Love Triangles (or 3+2=1)

Is there anyone who would volunteer to share what image came into their mind when they read today's sermon title, "Love Triangles"? Well, perhaps that's not the best way to begin.

Let me suggest one image. Not long ago, a headline read: "\_\_\_\_\_ News host \_\_\_\_\_ ... shares photo from his wedding to former producer... he had an affair with while married to his first wife". (1)

An even more recent article began, "In her new memoir... \_\_\_\_\_'s ex-wife... detailed her early relationship with her former husband and their divorce, saying her daughters found out about his affair... after finding his phone." (2)

I'm not an anti-media Luddite but still, if I were trying to learn about our culture in the U.S. simply from media (television, movies, songs, streaming services, social media), the impression I could easily get is that people in the US believe that one finds excitement and adventure in an extra-marital affair.

There is one dating site which an article noted, is "catering to married people". The article did say that fact "has attracted more than its fair share of controversy and scandal. Yet its motto 'Life is short. Have an affair' has remained at the heart of the dating platform for over 20 years." (3)

That's not a new concept. It's what King David sought when he began an adulterous affair with Bathsheeba, and then had her husband killed. Is it a source of fun and pleasure? There's a term for that line of thought, but I can't use the full term in church. Its initials, though, are "B.S." Human relationships have the potential to be miles deep - but so often, we tire quickly of the work required to deepen our relationships, so we seek a quick fix - and we end up with relationships which are a mile wide and an inch deep.

The source of contentment is not in a human love triangle. But the triangle is not just about being unfaithful - it is also a family counseling term. One counselor described a "... tendency in families ... to develop triangles. A two-party system is stable except during crisis. At that time, when anxiety increases, the more vulnerable person will involve a third person to alleviate the stress. An example is the overinvolved parent fused with the child who, when the child raises mayhem, calls the father to come down from the study and settle the child down. Another example is the man who, displeased with his wife, gets involved in an extramarital affair." (4)

Today it might not be inappropriate to think that "triangling" as a verb could describe families, but our state and nation as both major parties seek the "independents" to help them win their argument.

The two plus one affair is what we commonly think of when we hear the term “love triangle”, or perhaps some people think of family dynamics or even politics. But today, I want us to explore how a **healthy** love triangle – a **healthy** one - can be the source of happiness, contentment, and excitement.

But this is not just about the marriage commitment - it’s about healthy relationships of **many** kinds, at all ages. How can your relationships be stronger? Let’s begin with a mathematical equation, “ $3 + 2 = 1$ ”.

Well, no, that not a mathematical equation, it’s a **theological** equation: “ $3 + 2 = 1$ ”. Let me give you a little background.

Our lesson from John’s gospel is part of what scholars sometimes call the “farewell materials”. The 13<sup>th</sup> through the 17<sup>th</sup> chapters of this gospel relate the evangelist’s perspectives of the last supper, and then continue with a series of teachings and prayers, **all of which** focus on preparing the disciples (and the later Christians) for **what is to happen after Jesus’ death**.

The scripture was an introduction to the “ $3 + 2 = 1$ ” formula. During this farewell teaching, one of the disciples named Judas asks a question. (The gospel notes that this is another Judas, not Judas Iscariot who betrayed Jesus). The other Judas asked, “Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us and not to the world?” (John 14:22)

Jesus said both he and the Father would come and “make our home with” or “dwell in” those who loved him and kept his word. The word used for “dwell” is the same word used earlier, when Jesus told his followers, “In my Father’s house are many dwelling places.” The eternal life of the future would also be experienced in the present. Jesus then went on to explain more about this: the Holy Spirit would be with the disciples after Jesus was gone.

Fast forward a bit to 50 days after the resurrection of Jesus. The followers of Jesus had experienced the presence of the Holy Spirit - the promised Comforter - in new and dramatic ways. And it wasn’t long before Jesus’ followers began to seek ways to express and to share what they had experienced.

Over the years, this lead to the description, or “doctrine” as we call a description of belief, that we know as the Trinity. The early Christians described their experience God in three ways:

1. As the God of the Old Testament: the Creator of all that exists, the God of the Prophets, the God whom Jesus called “Abba” or “Father”;
2. They also experienced the presence of the divine or holy in Jesus: his earthly life, his teachings, his death, and his resurrection; he was, they expressed it, God’s Son;
3. And they experienced the presence of God in their lives in a third way: as an inner presence: a presence whom they variously called the Spirit of Christ,

or using names Jesus had spoken, the “Comforter”, the “Advocate”. It was God’s Holy Spirit, which had inspired the prophets of the past, and who now dwelled in those who followed the Son.

This positive love triangle they called the Trinity. This divine presence could be experienced by the human heart and mind and soul, yet it was so mysterious that they used very interesting ways of describing it.

“The Son and Holy Spirit co-existed with God from the very beginning, yet the Son and Spirit proceeded forth from the Father.” The three are equal, but “the Son will place all things under the Father’s rule at the end of time.” They used the finite language and images of their day to try to describe that which was infinite, to help others begin to comprehend **that which was, ultimately, beyond description.**

What does this image, the Trinity, say to us today? Is it simply mathematical nonsense? An old symbol which is no longer relevant? Or is this Love Triangle a helpful and necessary truth which will show us a way beyond the pain that human triangling in any form can bring to our relationships?

Psalm 8 we shared today contains a mystery in which Christians see God’s Triune nature. In verse 5, we read “Yet you have made (humans) a little lower than God”, and the Hebrew word translated “God” is plural. Other translations vary, using lower-case “gods” (The Message), or “the angels” (NIV), or “only slightly less than divine” (CEB).

While Christians should be cautious in reading too much into one word as we read the Hebrew Bible, it is interesting that a plural word used in Deut. 6:4, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord.” The Hebrew word used for “one” is echad - a **compound unity**. (Similar to our national motto, “E pluribus unum” - out of many, one”.)

Jesus spoke of this “3 + 2 = 1” formula earlier in his ministry. “Wherever two or more of you are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them.” His teaching from John’s gospel further reveals that not only will he be present with those who are gathered, but the Father and the Spirit will be present as well.

(By the way, if you’re into mathematical symbols, the number of followers should more accurately be shown with the “equal to or greater than” sign - the sideways arrow with a line below it - before the number two – because the 3, (the divine Trinity) are always present with the 2 (or more) followers gathered together, bringing all into into that one loving relationship.

That oneness of love is what Jesus commanded his followers to seek. “By this will people know that you are my disciples: that you love one another as I have loved you.”

We can see this positive love triangle in the covenant on marriage. The two persons of the couple coming to be married covenant their lives together, not simply 1 to 1, but their 2 lives with the 3: the Triune God, whose undergirding love is the basis for their 1 loving relationship. “And a man shall leave his mother, and a woman leave her home, and the two shall become one flesh.”

The sense of becoming one flesh is more than sexual union: it is the blending of two unique and special personalities into one loving covenant relationship. In one of the marriage ceremonies in the United Methodist Book of Worship, the prayer before the exchange of vows includes the petition for God’s blessing upon the couple, “that they may give their vows to one another in the strength and spirit of your steadfast love.” “3 + 2 = 1.”

Sometimes we Americans are so big on our individual uniqueness that we forget we are also called to be part of something bigger. To give up one’s self in loving and serving others is not to lose one’s life, but to find it.

This type of “love triangle” is healthy. It is similar to an expression made famous in the story of the Three Musketeers. Do you remember their rallying cry? (“All for one, and one for all.”)

Like the Musketeers, the husband, the wife, and God all work together to make the relationship work, to increase the love which exists not only between the couple, but to help that love flow forth into the world: sometimes physically in children, but also in creative ways of service to others.

And, the growth of that love and its extension to the world depends on the “one for all” half of that cry. We know that God has given all for the world, but a marriage also needs both the husband and wife to have a willingness to give themselves away for the sake of the relationship, and for God.

But this isn’t just about marriage relationships. This same “all for one and one for all” triangle of love can find expression in other relationships as well. Friend with friend, pastor and congregation members, parent and child, and on and on.

If you are a Christian, if you are seeking to follow Jesus Christ, then this kind of love triangle is what he calls us to offer to everyone we engage with in our lives.

We should enter each relationship - whether it is a brief encounter in the check-out line or a life-long commitment – we should enter with the knowledge that we come into that relationship, **not on our own**, but as someone who is **already in a relationship to, and thus an ambassador for, Jesus Christ.**

Ambassadors do not go to other countries with the attitude, "I think I'll say whatever I please to the leader of this nation." They go, knowing they represent someone higher than themselves.

In Latin, the "ian" suffix meant "one whose life is given over to" an activity or cause or person. That meaning has carried over into our language. A politician is one whose life is spent in politics. Pediatrician comes from a combination of the Greek words for "physician" and "child": a doctor whose life is given over to the care of children and youth.

Using that same formula, a Christ-ian is one whose life is given over to Christ. We should enter into every relationship as a person given over to Christ. When we are in relationship with others, we are called to represent and model Christ's love to the other person in our words and actions.

Or, if that person is also a Christian, also "given over to Christ", then our role becomes one of a builder. Like the Musketeers, we are to follow the "all for one and one for all" model. We are to build that other person up, in order to strengthen the body of Christ. And, lo and behold, we will find that we are being served as well: by Christ, and by that other person.

When they are working as God intends, each relationship is a two-to-one ratio: you're giving all you've got, but you've got two others giving you all they can: **the divine presence of God**, as well as **that other person**. And, although your human friend or partner or spouse may run out of grace on occasions, God does not.

When we give ourselves to Christ, then we do not go into the future alone. The same divine and loving presence who has been with us in every relationship (from our birth to the present) will be with us in the future, through all of life, and beyond death. Every new friend you make, every new challenge you face: you will have the power of the 3 behind, within, and ahead of you. You are wrapped in God's love triangle; and God will give you the power to share and invite others to experience that love as well.

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(1) Headline was "Fox News host Jesse Watters, 41, shares photo from his wedding to former producer, 27, he had an affair with while married to his first wife", on the webiste

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7875095/Fox-News-Jesse-Watters-pictured-new-27-year-old-bride-affair-with.html>

(2) First sentence of the article read "In her new memoir, "If We Break: A Memoir of Marriage, Addiction, and Healing," Hunter Biden's ex-wife Kathleen Buhle

detailed her early relationship with her former husband and their divorce, saying her daughters found out about his affair with his brother Beau's widow after finding his phone." Found on the website <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/in-memoir-hunter-bidens-ex-wife-reveals-how-she-learned-about-affair-with-sister-in-law-no-more-secrets/ar-AAY0GhY>

(3) Full quote: "If you're married and thinking about stepping outside of your relationship, you may have asked yourself: is Ashley Madison worth it? The dating site catering to married people has attracted more than its fair share of controversy and scandal. Yet its motto "Life is short. Have an affair" has remained at the heart of the dating platform for over 20 years."

<https://www.datingnews.com/daters-pulse/is-ashley-madison-worth-it/>

(4) Charles W. Stewart, *The Minister as Family Counselor* (c. 1979, Abingdon Press, Nashville), p. 80.