

TRINITY PUTTY

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2 Corinthians 13:11-13, Matthew 28:16-20

During World War II, the Japanese incursion across Asia cut off the United States' supply lines for rubber. Rubber was desperately needed to make the millions of tires demanded by jeeps, tanks, and airplanes, and other articles of war. American scientists scrambled to devise a substitute. In 1943, one of these scientists, a chemical engineer named James Wright, worked at General Electric. In his lab in New Haven, Connecticut, while seeking to create synthetic rubber, he mixed together boric acid and silicone oil. The resulting substance did not harden as he had hoped. It remained gooey. He tossed a gob of it onto the floor and was surprised to see that it bounced. This new compound not only bounced but it could be stretched and shaped. His discovery was circulated through the military and scientific communities, but no wartime use for it could be determined. It was essentially useless.

However, some of the executives at General Electric in New Haven, did find a use for this new substance. They would take it to parties for amusement. They called it nutty putty. People at the parties loved to play with it. An advertising executive who attended one of these parties quickly envisioned the putty's sales potential. He purchased the manufacturing rights from General Electric. This man was Peter Hodgson. At the time, he was \$12,000 in debt. He scraped together \$147 to secure the rights to the compound. He named the substance Silly Putty. He packaged the putty in plastic eggs that initially he purchased from the Connecticut Cooperative Poultry Association. Why eggs? As he explained, Easter was coming up and he thought the egg would help sales. He hired students from Yale University to fill and package the eggs. That was 1950.

Hodgson's Silly Putty didn't sell very well until it got a mention in The New Yorker magazine. Then, in just three days, orders came in for 250,000 eggs. Silly Putty was a hit. Over the years, Hodgson earned millions selling Silly Putty. It has been a hit with kids and adults for generations. In 1968, Silly Putty was rocketed into space aboard Apollo 8. In 2001, it was inducted into the National Toy Hall of Fame. When Hodgson died in 1976, the rights for Silly Putty were acquired by the makers of Crayola products. Today, Silly Putty is marketed by Crayola but manufactured by Dow Corning. It is still sold in plastic eggs.

Anyone who has handled Silly Putty knows that it has amazing properties. It bounces, it stretches like taffy, it can be molded into shapes. Although it is soft and pliable, if you hit it with a hammer it will shatter into pieces. As a kid, my favorite activity with Silly Putty was to make copies of the comics in the newspaper. This doesn't work so well today because newspaper ink has changed. But, back in the

day, if you pressed Silly Putty onto newspaper print or a comic book, the print would transfer from the paper to the putty. It was fun to do this with the comics and then stretch the images into funny shapes. It was an early form of Photoshop.

While the manufacturing of Silly Putty is pretty straightforward, the science of the compound is delightfully complex. The polymers in Silly Putty have covalent bonds within their molecule, but hydrogen bonds between the molecules. These hydrogen bonds are easily broken. When small amounts of stress are applied to the putty—such as stretching it—only a few bonds are broken and the putty “flows.” When greater amounts of stress are applied quickly, the hydrogen bonds break causing the putty to shatter or tear. Drop a ball of putty on the floor and it bounces. Smack it with a hammer and it breaks into small pieces.

Officially, Dow Corning labels this product as 3179 Dilatant Compound. You can purchase it from them directly if you wish (and if you need 100 pounds of the stuff). As a dilatant compound, Silly Putty has an inverse thixotrophy. In other words, even though it is a viscous suspension (a gel), it becomes solid under the influence of pressure.

Silly Putty is also a viscoelastic liquid. It can retain its shape for a short period of time. In the long run, it acts like a liquid and flows. Scientists have yet to agree if Silly Putty is a solid or a liquid. It is either a liquid solid or a solid liquid. It is difficult to pin down. I believe that is part of its appeal. You play with it never quite sure what it is.

On our church’ calendar, today is Trinity Sunday. Other days on the calendar—Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, etc.—celebrate specific events. Trinity Sunday is the only day that celebrates a doctrine. Trinity Sunday is the day that calls on us to reflect on the Christian doctrine of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I like to think of the Trinity as the Silly Putty of doctrines because it is so difficult to pin down. We’re never exactly sure what it is.

When I called the Trinity silly, I am not meaning any disrespect. To an outsider, the idea of God the Three-in-One is tough to wrap your head around. It's not unlike other components of our faith that are also hard to sell. Paul talked about the *folly of the cross*. And early Christians had trouble convincing sceptics that when Jesus said, *This is my body. Take. Eat.*, he wasn't invoking cannibalism.

The notion of the Trinity is a challenge to define. It doesn't describe God so much as it describes our relationship with God—how do we relate to God and how does God relate to us. The classic formula for the doctrine of the Trinity is “one person, three personalities.” God is one, yet God can be expressed as Father, Son, and Spirit. Each are equal, each are divine, and each relates to the others. Think of it this way: I—Sherard—am one person. But I am also a father, son, and husband. I

relate to my daughter, parents, and wife in different ways. I am not three different people. These are three aspects of my personality.

God is One but relates to us in the many ways that conform to our needs. God is Father—the creator, the parent, the leader. God is Son who comes to directly as one of us, bringing the message of good news. And then God comes to us in ways that we can't specify or even see. God is the Spirit moving among us, drawing us together. As Paul writes, God is the source of grace, love, and community.

The doctrine of the Trinity is not one you will find spelled out in scripture. It is there but only in bits and pieces. And it took the church several centuries to hammer out this particular understanding of God.

There are very few “trinitarian” passages in our scriptures. I've chosen to lift up two of them today. Don't expect these passages to explain the Trinity; they don't.

We first read from Paul's Second Letter to the church in Corinth. In this letter Paul addresses the divisions that have cropped up in that young congregation. Although Paul founded that particular church, others came along later with teachings that deviate from Paul's—teachings that weaken the Christian message. Factions have emerged within the church over which of these teachers they should follow. In his letter, Paul attempts to bring reconciliation to this struggling congregation.

In our reading for today, Paul calls for peace, he calls for renewal of community, he calls for grace. He urges his people to bring order to their faith, to agree with one another, to live in peace. If they can accomplish these things, he tells them then, *The God of love and peace will be with them.*

Paul concludes his letter with this assurance, *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.* Technically, this is not a true Trinitarian formula. In it we do find Jesus, God, and Holy Spirit, but not Father, Son, and Spirit. Nonetheless, it still conveys the idea of the several “persons” of the divine. Despite the divisions in his congregation, Paul's goal is to bring God's peace to this fractured community.

Over this past week, we have all watched as protests have erupted across our nation. These protests have been largely peaceful with participants marching, chanting, and singing—demonstrating their desire for change. They seek change to a system they feel lacks justice. They are marching for justice and peace.

As Paul argues, the peace these protestors seek, the peace that is missing from the Corinth church, is peace that comes from God. To find this peace, they are going to need the grace expressed by Jesus, the love that originates with God, and the community rooted in the power of the Spirit.

Our second reading is from the gospel of Matthew. Here, we find Jesus with his disciples for the final time. Jesus was crucified. But he has come back to life and is now in Galilee on a mountain with his disciples. He speaks to them saying, *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me*. What authority does Jesus have? He's a convicted criminal. He's an out-of-work preacher. He has no standing. But as we've witnessed, Jesus has authority to heal the sick, to raise the dead, to cast out demons, to renew the broken, to forgive sins. Jesus was executed by the authorities and yet he triumphed. Jesus has authority over death itself. He truly has all the authority of heaven and earth. He is not some second-string player, he is not junior to God's Father, he is God. His word is God's word. He has *all authority* of creation—the same authority of the Father and the Spirit.

With this authority, Jesus commissions his disciples to go out into the world. He tells them, *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*. But Jesus is not sending the disciples out alone. His final words to them are words of assurance, *Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age*.

When Jesus commissions his disciples to go out into the world, he's not sending them out just to tell people about the gospel, he is sending them out as protesters. "Go to the corners of the world and call out the injustice you find. Speak truth. Forgive sins. When you find brokenness, institute healing. Shine a light on the darkness of injustice. Bring change to this world. Bring peace. I give you the authority of God to do these things." Followers of Christ must march through the streets calling out sin, but doing it as a reflection of God's love in such a way that ensures peace and new life for all people.

The mysterious doctrine of the Trinity is a doctrine of creation. God creates in so many wonderful ways. And God continues creating in every moment through actions of divine grace, love, and communion. Let us not ignore the Trinity just because we don't fully grasp its meaning. Let us celebrate its power to make us new.

One last thing. I don't believe it would hurt us to be like Silly Putty. If Silly Putty had been around in Paul's day, he may have held it up before his church and said, "Be like this. When you fall, learn to bounce. When someone pushes against you, learn to give a little. Don't be so rigid that you are stuck in one shape. If you get smacked with a hammer, pick up the pieces and pull yourself together. We are putty in God's hands."