

Trinity Sunday, Yr C

June 16, 2019

I'm sure you've heard the old saw about more heresy being preached on Trinity Sunday than on any other Sunday of the year. As you know, Nicci is doing a field education summer with us, and that involves preaching three sermons. Looking only at the calendar and not at the scriptures, I had asked her to preach today. It was only when she said she couldn't be here today because she was taking her daughter to camp, that I checked the scriptures and realized that she had dodged the Trinity bullet and that I was the one left with the sermon for today. Do I hear her chuckling? Surely not!

The trinity is always characterized as a mystery, and very often that means something like: it's a theological tangle, you'll never understand it anyway, so just move on. One prominent scholar once wondered if it would make any difference at all if the doctrine of the Trinity just disappeared.

But then I read something that said what if saying that something was a mystery didn't mean that you'd never understand it, but rather that you would endlessly understand it. There was always more that you could understand, even though you'd never grasp the thing completely. That makes a big difference.

And there's something else; what if the Trinitarian pattern that exists in the Godhead is the pattern for all creation, including human life. If we look at the Trinity like that, what do we see? We see three distinct persons, autonomous, but existing in perfect unity. When the early church was wrestling with this, it was the Cappadocian Fathers in the Eastern Church who came up with what they called 'perichoresis' which means, wonderfully enough, "dancing around." Whatever is going on in God, they said, is about RELATIONSHIP – it's about a flow, a radical relatedness, a perfect communion, a flowing of love between and among the three persons. It's a model of self-giving, self-emptying, creating, empowering, participating in community. But it's not just those three persons of the Trinity in some kind of closed circle. Instead, as one scholar put it,

"The stunning truth is that this triune God, in amazing and lavish love, determined to open the circle and share the Trinitarian life with others. This is the one, eternal and abiding reason for the creation of the world and of human life...Before the creation of the world, the Father, Son and Spirit set their love upon us and planned to bring us to share and know and experience the Trinitarian life itself. Unto this end the cosmos was called into being, and the human race was fashioned, and Adam and Eve were given a place in the coming of Jesus Christ... in and through whom the dream of our adoption would be accomplished."

If that's right and the Trinitarian pattern governs creation and that we're invited into it, what would that kind of life look like?

And here, I'd like to step back a minute and think about how God is viewed and why that matters. In the most recent Bible class, we were reading the book of Mark. You may remember that in Mark, Jesus takes great pains to tell people to keep what's called the Messianic secret. He would heal people and then say, but don't tell anyone. So the question naturally arises: what's that about? One mainstream opinion is that because the Jewish people expected the Messiah to be a kind of warrior king, coming with armies to get rid of the Romans and to restore Israel to its former glory, Jesus was afraid that if people labeled him the Messiah, they would totally misunderstand what he was all about.

There are two visions of power operating here. There's the one commonly held: that power is about force and coercion – that's the vision with armies and violence. But Jesus was about a totally different kind of power - he was about the power WITH people that came with love and was characterized by vulnerability. And, if we're honest, isn't there some part of us that prefers the former God, the one that will come and smite our enemies and straighten everything out, being sure to keep us in the top favored position? Do we want a vulnerable God? Do we want a God that only "wins" through suffering love? Because of course, if that's the kind of God we have, then that's the path we're called to walk as well. Instead of coercion and domination, God, as illustrated by the Trinity, is about being in relationships that are characterized by giving, sharing, letting go, trusting, vulnerability.

To say that that's a challenge for us is an understatement. But maybe our identities are just too small. Maybe we're being called to go beyond our small, cultural identities and recognize that we've a larger identity as members of the body of Christ. Maybe it's only the recognition of that communal identity that will enable us to dismantle all our cultural divisions and work toward reconciliation.

Richard Rohr, in talking about this deeper understanding of the Trinity says:

...this unearthing of Trinity can't come a moment too soon. Because I'm convinced that beneath the ugly manifestations of our present evils – political corruption, ecological devastation, warring against one another, hating each other based on race, gender, religion or sexual orientation – the greatest dis-ease facing humanity right now is our profound and painful sense of disconnection. (*The Divine Dance*)

We need the dance of relationships. Here are a couple of stories about that. One is about an elderly fellow taking a walk when he heard a small voice crying out, "Help me, help me." At first he didn't see anyone, but looking more closely, he saw that the voice belonged to a small frog. When he picked it up, the frog said, "I'm really a beautiful princess and, if you will kiss me, I'll turn back into a princess and will hug and kiss you and love you forever." The man put the frog in his top pocket and continued his walk.

After a bit the frog asked, “Why don’t you kiss me?” And the man said, “Frankly, at this stage of my life, I’d rather have a talking frog.”

More serious is a passage from Zorba the Greek in which Zorba tells that when he was a child, an old man said, “I’m going to tell you a secret. You’re too small to understand now, but you’ll understand when you are bigger. Listen, little one. Neither the seven stories of Heaven nor the seven stories of Earth are enough to contain God, but a person’s heart can contain God. So, be careful - and my blessing be with you – never to wound another person’s heart.”

And even more serious is the one Rabbi Jonathon Sacks tells about a young man who was seriously depressed and wrote to a rabbi saying something like, “I need your help. I am deeply depressed. I pray and find no comfort. I perform the commands but feel nothing. I find it hard to carry on.” The story was that the rabbi circled all the I’s in the letter and sent it back. We are designed to live and grow together. If our only reality is “I” we are left frightened and alone, trapped in a meaningless solipsism.

So, the Trinity, inviting us into the very heart of God, inviting us to live a Trinitarian life. Inviting us into the divine dance. I was thinking about this image of dance and thinking that in a dance where there are only two people, there are all those issues of who’s going to lead, and whose toes will be stepped on. But if we use the image of square dancing – it’s a diverse community of folks, but with all kinds of connections being made during the dance, weaving in and out and among one another, cooperating (mostly) and creating something of joy and beauty. Let me close with a meditation that Thomas Merton wrote about the dance of creation:

The Lord plays and diverts himself in the garden of his creation, and if we could let go of our obsession with what we think is the meaning of it all, we might be able to hear his call and follow him in his mysterious cosmic dance... For the world and time are the dance of the Lord in emptiness. The silence of the spheres is the music of a wedding feast. The more we persist in misunderstanding the phenomena of life, the more we analyze them out into strange finalities and complex purposes of our own, the more we involve ourselves in sadness, absurdity and despair. But it does not matter much, because no despair of ours can alter the reality of things, or stain the joy of the cosmic dance which is always there. Indeed, we are in the midst of it, and it is in the midst of us, for it beats in our very blood, whether we want it to or not. Yet the fact remains that we are invited to forget ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to the winds and join in the general dance. (*New Seeds of Contemplation*)

We’re ultimately safe in that circle of love that is the Trinity. Shall we dance? Amen.