

Sunday, June 7, 2020

Trinity Sunday (Year A)

Matthew 28.16-20

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/569687760589821/>

(Sermon begins at about 14:00)

“The Trinity as the Model for Relationship”

What is the Trinity? That is the question we ask ourselves every year on the first Sunday after Pentecost, when we celebrate Trinity Sunday. The Sunday dedicated to that unfathomable doctrine of the Church that, despite being completely incomprehensible, is so central to our religion. According to the doctrine of the Trinity, we believe in one God who is comprised of what theologians rather unfortunately refer to as three “persons.” “Persons” is really a misleading label, as we are not dealing with corporeal humans, Jesus notwithstanding. In actuality, the Greek term that we have translated as “person” is more aptly translated as “being” or “substantive reality.” Or, as applied to the Trinity, “individual reality.”

Of course, we know that these three “persons” are God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. These three “persons” are distinct, but at the same time are of one substance or essence or nature. Despite being distinct, each “person” is wholly God. One God in three “persons.” Three “persons,” all of the same essence and nature.

The difficulty we run up against in trying to explain this is that there is no explicit description of the Trinity in the Bible. The term is never used in the Bible. Now there are numerous texts dealing with each of the “persons” individually. And there are also many references to the interrelationship between various “persons” of the Trinity.” But there is very little in the Bible that really bring it all together in a coherent manner. The closest we come is in today’s Gospel reading, where Jesus directs the disciples to “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” (Mt 28.19). Based on the disparate information in the Bible about these three “persons” and how they relate and interact, theologians have developed the doctrine of the Trinity to describe a great mystery of our faith: one God being comprise of three “persons; three “persons” that are each totally and completely one God.

But where does that get us? The whole concept still remains incomprehensible to our human understanding. So, every year, preachers struggle and agonize over just how to make the concept of the Trinity understandable. And every year, we come up short. So, instead of trying to come up with yet another analogy to explain what the Trinity is, what if we forgot all that? What if we focus, instead, on what the Trinity is meant to show us, teach us, and model for us, without regard to the mechanics? What if we focus on how we can apply something about the Trinity to our own lives, without worrying about how the Trinity actually operates? Kind of like how we can use electricity and enjoy its benefits without having to understand the physics behind electricity.

In short, the Trinity is a community of love and joy. “The 12th-century mystic Richard of St. Victor (1123—1173) wrote about the Trinity as a mutual, loving, companionship of friends—a community, if you will.” Richard Rohr, a contemporary Roman Catholic priest, Franciscan friar, and spiritual writer—and some would say a mystic in his own right—summarizes some of the ideas espoused by Richard of St. Victor: “For God to be good, God can be one. For God to be loving, God has to be two, because love is always a relationship. But for God to share ‘excellent joy’ and ‘delight’ God has to be three, because supreme happiness is when two persons share their common delight in a third something—together. All we need to do is witness a couple after the birth of their baby, and we know this is true.”¹

Not having read Richard of St. Victor’s original writings, I cannot speak to how he arrived at this assessment. But my understanding based on Rohr’s synthesis is that his focus is not so much on attempting to explain how we ended up with a Trinitarian God, but rather to say something about the perfection of the relationship inherent in the Trinity, regardless of how that came to be. One that is a mutual, reciprocal loving relationship among equals that is founded on more than just the bond between the two, but which includes a common source of joy and delight that further enhances and enriches the individual and the collective. In this way, God becomes the fullest expression of Godself through the community of the Trinity.

In examining the work of Richard of St. Victor, Richard Rohr notes that “A divine foundation of relationship is what all religion, spirituality, and perhaps even politics, is aiming for. The Trinity offers us these precise gifts—a grounded connection with God, self, others, and the world. This ancient doctrine dared to affirm that *God is relationship itself*. The way of Jesus therefore is an invitation to a way of living, loving, and relating.” Rohr’s conclusion—the logical extension of the Christian understanding about God, about Jesus, and about the Holy Spirit—is that, “If we believe in a Trinitarian God, then we must hold fast to the truth that God is community—a completely loving, mutually self-giving, endlessly generative relationship between equal partners.”²

The implications of this are profound. God as relationship, the Trinity as the model for community, is the foundation of all that we believe. This is what undergirds our faith and how we are to live out of that faith. How we are to love out of that faith. When asked what the greatest commandment is, Jesus responded, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Mt 22.37-40). While Jesus says that loving God is the greatest commandment, he also says that the second—loving your neighbor as yourself—is like the first. This tells me that he intended love of neighbor to be of equal importance to love of God. That we are to love God and neighbor equally!

Now there’s a challenge! And while challenging, critical to our lives as Christians. And to make it even more challenging, we need to be clear that when Jesus commands us to love our neighbor, he isn’t just talking about the people who live on either side of us. In this commandment, he is quoting from Leviticus chapter 19, which offers an extensive and expansive vision of relationship with the world characterized by just human relations and practical care of the other. Whoever the other is. In other words, he is talking about loving

everyone! And when he says that you are to love them “as yourself,” the better translation is “as one like yourself.” So, the implication is that we are to love everyone as if they were like us.

Now that’s easy to do when we are dealing with those who are part of our “in” group—be they family, close friends, or members of our church group. Those to whom we are intimately connected in some way. Those who share the same values we do. Those who think like us. Those who look like us. But what about those who are different from us in some way? What about those who have different priorities? What about those who have different values or beliefs? What about those who have different opinions? What about those who look different from us? Are we able to love them as ones like us? Are we even able to recognize them as “neighbor?” Are we even able to recognize them as being like us?

In a broader context, that is what the protests that have happened during the last two weeks all over our country, including in our own city, have been about. Yes, the precipitating event was the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer. Someone who was viewed by that officer as “other,” not as one like himself. But the circumstances of Mr. Floyd’s brutal death raise the broader issue of systemic racism. Of the many ways that our society views some people as “other.” Of the many ways that our society and our institutions do not treat all people equally. Particularly of the many ways that we as a nation treat people of color as lesser, as not worthy of the same benefits that many of us take for granted. Access to a good education. Access to adequate health care. Access to employment and fair wages. Access to decent housing. The list goes on and on. But what it all boils down to is that some of our neighbors are denied the basic respect and dignity that so many of us take for granted. All because they are not viewed as being ones like us. Or put in basic Christian terms, we are not loving our neighbors as ourselves.

I am not saying any of us are directly responsible for any of these actions. I am merely pointing out the state of our nation, the state of our society. Of which we are all a part. From which many of us benefit, while others do not. In this, those of us who benefit bear culpability precisely because we are part of the system, whether we agree with it or not. “Mother Teresa diagnosed the world’s ills in this way: we’ve just ‘forgotten that we belong to each other.’”³ As citizens of this nation to be sure, but particularly as Christians, we have a responsibility to one another. We have a responsibility to our neighbors. We have a responsibility to remember that we belong to each other. We have a responsibility to remember that we are brothers and sister, all made in the image and likeness of God. And that in and of itself makes us equal. If we can remember that, maybe it will be a little easier to see others, whoever they are, as being ones like us. And then to treat them accordingly.

I know this is not easy work. But it is the work that is commanded by our Lord. And it is the work that is so needed in our society at this particular moment in history.

When I was a kid and my sister and I would fight, as all siblings do, my father would say, “You don’t see your mother and I behaving like that.” His way of telling us to look at and learn from the model that we had for relationship—that of our parents. In our society, we have a number of models for relationship and community, and yet, many—most—of these models for communal relationship are obviously not working. As Christians, we need to remember that we

are the children of the Triune God. We are lovingly made in the image and likeness of God the Father. We are redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ. We are energized, inspired, and guided by the Holy Spirit. We need to look to their relationship as a model for our own relationships. To seek to build relationships and community based on equality, based on mutual, self-less love. Just as God becomes the fullest expression of Godself through the community of the Trinity, so too do we become the fullest expression of ourselves, both individually and collectively, when we are in relationship as modeled by the Trinity. If we can begin to do that, we just might be able to experience true joy and delight in one another.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

¹ Richard Rohr, "The Foundation of Community," Center for Action and Contemplation, May 5, 2020. <https://cac.org/the-foundation-of-community-2020-05-05/>.

² Rohr, "The Foundation of Community."

³ Richard Rohr, "Being One with the Other," Center for Action and Contemplation, June 4, 2020. <https://cac.org/being-one-with-the-other-2020-06-04/>.