



Trinity Sunday/A

COVID-19, Protests and Riots, and the Holy Trinity

Genesis 1:1-2:4a; Psalm 8 or Canticle 13; 2 Corinthians 13:11-13; Matthew 28:16-20

In this time of an ongoing worldwide viral pandemic that disproportionately affects the poor, the vulnerable, and infirm, highlighting the inequities of health care within our nation and across the world . . .

In the presence of another senseless murder of a black man by a white man in authority . . .

In the midst of days of peaceful protests, and nights of violence – rioting, burning, looting, vandalism, and still more senseless deaths – in cities large and small . . .

In light of all this fear, and despair, and insanity, we may well ask just what is the point of studying the Holy Trinity? Why even try to glimpse, let alone grasp, the essence of the nature of God? Such a pursuit at such a time may seem frivolous at best, perhaps completely irrelevant. Is contemplating the Trinitarian nature of God more a symptom of the Church's collective denial, a diversion from reality? Is the search for hope and meaning during our current situation a Pollyanna exercise in futility? In the midst of all that presently demands our attention and seems much more urgent and important, why should we stop to celebrate an admittedly incomprehensible, abstract-sounding, ancient church doctrine?

Perhaps it is precisely because of these fearful times we find ourselves in that we need to stop and spend some time with the Holy Trinity. An argument could be made that these difficult days are actually the perfect time to dig deeper into the essence of the Three-in-One God we worship. We find in Scripture, and in the teachings of the Church, that the nature of God is an essential and eternal connectedness. This communion within God's own self gives us a glimpse into the very heart of God – and, knowing that a deep connectedness describes well the universe in which we live, speaks to the longings in our own hearts as we are separated – physically, emotionally, spiritually, racially, ethnically, intellectually, socio-economically, and in so many other ways – separated one from another. Perhaps this pause to consider and reflect on God's inner-connectedness may inform and enlighten our own sense of connectedness we are all feeling – and in some sense, missing and grieving - right now.

Before God created everything that is, or has been, or ever will be, everything we see and know, there existed a communion of three separate persons of the Godhead who created each of us out of love - created you for love, and to be loved. Not just one being, but an eternal web of divine relationships, all-encompassing interconnectedness, and all-powerful communion, that was from before time and forever. And this is why you were created: to be in a healthy, loving, generative, creative, dynamic relationship with your Creator, and with all of Creation. It is out of this complex web of relationships that comes both your own, very specific, personal salvation in the most narrow focus, and the redemption of all humanity and all Creation in the big picture view.

You may be interested to know that, despite its centrality to our Christian understanding of God, the word 'Trinity' never appears anywhere in the Bible. Not once! Yet, in passages like this morning's reading from the Great Commission in Matthew's Gospel, we read of baptizing new followers of Jesus "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" – the very same words still used to baptize every new Christian. And we can read a different Trinitarian formulation in Second Corinthians: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you." One in three; and three in one. In phrasing that reminds us of the three Musketeers, we come to know our God. Three attributes – grace, love, communion – of one God, through one God, in one God.

The first Christians were less concerned about doctrinal formulation and explanation than in following the way of Jesus. The Book of Acts tells us that, in the earliest years, the followers of Jesus patterned their daily lives in prayer and fasting, in service to others, and gathering for worship. From the very beginning of the Christian community, new followers were baptized using that same Trinitarian formula we find in Matthew. Eventually, in time, after a few generations and centuries had passed, theologians began to question and think more deeply about what it meant to speak of a God who is both one, and also three.

All through Scripture, there is both the idea of one God, and, at the same time, the description of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Greek writers would use the term *trias*, and the early church writer Tertullian coined the Latin word, *Trinitas*, or “Trinity”. He used the terms “Person” and “Substance” to describe what his mind saw when he contemplated the scriptures regarding this three-in-one God. Tertullian, writing in the second and third centuries, would be led to say that there is a Trinity — a threeness — with three separate persons, united into but a single substance.

But, the analogies used to illustrate what we mean by the threeness-yet-oneness of God all, in the end, fall woefully short. Saint Patrick’s three petals forming a single shamrock. John Wesley’s example of three candles in a room, yet one light by which to read. And we can speak of other analogies for the Trinity: interlocking circles; H₂O being steam, water, and ice. But whatever language or image we may choose to use, we know God is much more than two dudes and a bird.

In fact, when we use any single image, like the shamrock . . . when we push any image too far, we find ourselves dancing dangerously close to an early church heresy. Better to use a number of images, a whole host of analogies, all the while knowing that while our words may be helpful, they can never clearly and precisely express the ineffable quality of God. In the end, the finite – humanity – can never fully know or explain the Infinite – the Godhead. Regardless of intellectual ability or fertility of imagination, the creature cannot know the fullness of the One who created it.

John Wesley put it this way: “Bring me a worm that can comprehend a man, and then I will show you a man that can comprehend the triune God!” Ultimately, God

will always be more than we can wrap our minds around, and that is necessarily so. Yet the Trinity is not a mystery in the sense of a puzzle we just haven't yet solved; no, the Trinity is a mystery in that, while we see the truth of it, there is always more than we can possibly begin to ever fully comprehend.

Using the word mystery, in this case, is closer to describing as mystery the love that exists between and among humans. We come to know so much about those we love, and yet new occasions continually arise which reveal there is always more to discover in the relationship with our child, or spouse, or parents, or close friends. We can and do know of God from God, by the revelation of Scripture, from the way God is revealed in nature, and through that most perfect revelation of God, Jesus the Christ. And yet, regardless of how much we may come to know about God, there is always more to know, and indeed more than we can ever know – an infinite mystery that is forever deeper than our finite minds can fathom.

Early Christians looked to God as known in Scripture and, with a nudge or two from that undivided Triune God, forged the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. Then, moving back from that concept, they looked anew at the Scripture and discovered how well it all fit. Reading the Bible with new eyes, they saw that God was in communion with God's own self even before the first day of Creation. God is a relationship among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and then that three-in-one God creates all that is to be in a loving relationship with himself – or herself – or themselves. God creates us for the sole purpose of being loved – and asks only to be loved in return.

If we humans preferred to be alone, coming together only rarely to procreate and then separate as most animals do, this theory of our need for community and relationship would fall short at this point. But being made in the very image of God, we humans long to be together, to be united, to love and be loved in return. This is a lesson many of us have learned well during the shelter-in-place, isolation, and quarantine orders that have come with the pandemic. And it is the reason we grieve so deeply over the reminder that we are not united, as we may try to convince ourselves, but still separated by the ugly sin of racism, and many other sins that still work to divide us.

Jesus would put it this way: “Love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.” This is that for which we were created: love upward toward God, and outward toward all of humankind, our sisters and brothers in Christ. That web of relationships is complex, complicated, and inextricably interconnected. As we come to love God more, we find room in our heart for other people – we find our heart transformed and enlarged into that same expansive heart that God has. Love of God draws us to love other people. Loving other people fully and completely means seeing them as God sees them, and so loving others also draws us closer to God. Round and round this cycle goes: drawing us ever closer to others, which draws us closer to God, which draws us deeper into love with one another, which deepens our love for God, which then . . . on, and on, and on. This ever-deepening cycle of love then is the communion for which we were created.

In this time of physical distancing, we are discovering more about how deep our human longing is for connection and community. While we may not gather for in-person worship, the essential truth of God as revealed in the Holy Trinity is all the more urgent in our present moment. We are connected deeply to all Creation. That is the essential reality the Trinity helps us to understand.

And as this past week has shown us, we also live in a society with great and deep divisions. The love we are created to show must find expression in our continual reaching out to others in all the ways available to us. This is not something we do to earn the favor of the Holy Trinity. Instead, staying in contact with others, loving others, serving others, is part of how God blesses us, inviting us to share in the divine work, allowing us the privilege to be conduits of God’s grace, and peace, and love, and belonging for others.

Early Christians put the practices of faith ahead of trying to be precise about what they meant when referring to God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We, too, can prioritize our practices of faith and let our understanding catch up later. The real grace in our understanding of the Holy Trinity is that it shows us that none of what we want to do for others relies on us alone – for it is the Holy Spirit working through our imperfect words and actions to connect us to other people, and ultimately, more fully to our Triune God. *Amen.*