

June 16, 2019
Second Sunday After Pentecost

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Scripture: John 8:2-11; John 12: 24-25

God for us, we call you Father.

God alongside us, we call you Jesus.

God within us, we call you Holy Spirit.

*You are the eternal mystery that enables, enfolds, and enlivens all things,
Even us and even me.*

Every name falls short of your goodness and greatness.

We can only see who you are in what is.

We ask for such perfect seeing—

As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be.

Amen. (Richard Rohr)

The Sacred Three

That I preach but once a month is both a blessing and a curse. The blessing is that it gives me extra time to delve deeply into a subject, and the curse is that it gives me extra time to delve deeply into a subject. This has certainly been true in the past three or four weeks. I must admit, however, that when I saw that I was scheduled to be on tap for Trinity Sunday, I muttered some words I shall respectfully not repeat this morning. Finally, realizing there was no way out, I held my nose and jumped into what I have long considered an enigma: the Trinity. And down I went, into the fathoms of the church's often dogmatic, historical understanding of this concept and the assertion that the three arms of the Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit make one thing. Math has never been my forte and I continued to be stymied by the perpetual and bewildering equation of one plus one plus one equaling One. Of two plus one equaling One.

Then I happened upon a wonderful book about the Trinity by Richard Rohr called *The Divine Dance*. Reading that alongside his recent transformative book *The Universal Christ*, and Cynthia Bourgeault's *The Law of Three* inspired me. To the point that I willingly and enthusiastically dived deeper and deeper into what I have come to see as the great gift of the Trinity. A week ago, I realized that I had to stop reading and come up to the surface because this morning was fast approaching and it was clearly going to be nigh unto impossible for me to offer you anything remotely accessible in fourteen minutes. I had to stop researching and reading and, like an otter, flipping and twirling in the primordial gift of God's love expressed in the Trinity.

On Wednesday morning, I sat down at my computer, lit a candle, and called on Jesus for a little help, explaining that I had no idea how to make this at all comprehensible. And honestly, I was immediately flooded with the image of him by my side, rolling his eyes, throwing his arms in the air and saying, "I hear you! I had the same problem!"

What I am giving you this morning are essentially chapter headings, ways you might begin to think about how we understand God through the rich concept of Trinity. Yesterday, I read Charlie the sermon as I normally do because he always, always saves you from my confusion. When I'd finished, I asked him if he was able to take anything away, if any of it was clear and he said, "I had to think really hard." So put on your thinking caps and come with me.

The Trinity is fundamentally a way of accessing the divine, of translating the profound mystery and complexity of God into some framework, some image that resonates with us. The traditional image is that of the cross and we have here three crosses from different traditions.

The cross to the left is a simple cross, a structure of two planes intersecting. It reminds us of Jesus' crucifixion on the cross and of the glory of Easter morning, of Christ resurrected and risen, for he is no longer there. In that way it represents both the worst of times and the best of times and affirms Christ with us forever.

The one on the right is a crucifix; it has the image of the crucified Jesus still on the cross. You don't see this often in Protestant churches and I brought it out this morning after the children left. Let's be honest, it's jarring and there simply wasn't time to explain it to them before they went to Sunday School. Years ago Charlie and I took our young children to a performance of the Messiah at St. Augustine's Catholic Church in Montpelier. They wanted to sit in the front row so they could see the musicians and singers. Getting up to leave when it was over, Eliza, aged seven, turned around and saw an enormous crucifix on the back wall of the sanctuary and exclaimed in shock, "Imagine having that as a decoration!" She was already entrenched in the Protestant tradition.

This cross, this crucifix is alarming to us with its graphic depiction of Jesus' crucifixion. And you might say, "It's shows the worst of times and doesn't speak of the best of times, of the resurrection! It's gruesome, gory and sad." But wait, stay with it awhile.

One of the interpretations of Jesus' death is called the atonement and is seen as evidence of his having "died for our sins." Which, honestly, is about impossible to understand unless you see God as some vindictive judge who demands that a price be paid for our wickedness. This is no God of mine. The inclination of some who understand it this way is to thank Jesus for paying our ransom.

What if, instead, we are not to thank Jesus for paying our bride price but to emulate him? What if we look upon this crucifix and see his utter willingness to suffer, to bear the cost for having spoken his truth to the powers that be? What if we see in this image, an invitation to love, to compassion, to be with others in their suffering? What we recoil from is exactly what Jesus embraced: vulnerability, pain and sacrifice, so graphically depicted in this crucifix. What we know in our hearts is that he did it for love, that his core message was about love. Embodied in this crucifix is the paradox of the intertwining of both great suffering and great love. That Jesus' participation in love and suffering should result in the resurrection is also something we know in our hearts. That is how we all grow and are renewed and

reborn. Though we might wish this were not so, it is through trial and suffering that we gain understanding and some small measure of wisdom. Likewise it is through great love that we are inspired and filled and impelled towards life.

The cross in the middle is the Celtic Cross and I've created a variation of it on the cover of the bulletin with the moving three spirals within, representing the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. There is always a circle in these crosses and the circle is derived from the ancient pagan sun symbol, and reflects the Celtic tradition's close connection to the earth and creation.

That the creation itself is central in the Celtic Cross is key. Richard Rohr, in his new book *The Universal Christ*, makes what I can only describe as an astounding and liberating suggestion. First, recall that we say ours is incarnational faith, that we follow Jesus whom we understand as the first incarnation of God. Rohr suggests that Jesus was not the first incarnation; the first incarnation was creation. All creation, not just our little planet, all galaxies and worms, ants, animals and atoms. So God's love for the world is made manifest in the gift of creation. When I first read this, I felt pure relief, because, really, we know this, don't we? We know that God is with us and revealed in the beauty and majesty of creation.

In each of these crosses we are presented with two linear planes coming together. We can see it in many ways, but consider the horizontal plane as an engagement in our earthly, blessed and complicated, carnal existence, full of mess and love and confusion and pain and joy. Jesus came to walk on this plane--our lives--to help us navigate a way forward in love, mercy and compassion.

Consider the vertical plane as our aspiring to know God, our desire to find a path of honesty, mercy, grace and integrity based on love. Let's face it, it isn't easy.

So we bring these two ways of being together, and we have a cross, an intersecting of our elemental lives with our prayers and reaching for God. And that looks like just two elements, doesn't it? At least in the cross on the left. The secret is that the third element occurs in the center, where Jesus and reconciliation, healing and love abide. In both the crucifix and the Celtic Cross, this is more

evident, the importance of Jesus' example and witness at the heart of our lives. Here is the joining of seemingly disparate forces, the resurrection that occurs when peace is brokered, when healing and love are born anew. We are redeemed by love and compassion but sometimes we can't find it.

Which brings us to the second chapter heading: the inherent, intrinsic nature of three that is woven through all creation. At its most basic level, the structure of the stuff of creation is trinary. The atom is made up of protons, neutrons and electrons, with the neutrons and protons within the center, the nucleus, and the electron circling around it, kind of like the Holy Spirit.

Cynthia Bourgeault has written extensively about what is called the "Law of Three." Some of the characteristics of this dynamic, are:

- In every new arising, there are three forces involved
- They are not fixed points or permanent attributes, but ones that shift and must be discerned situationally.
- Solutions to impasses or sticking points generally come by learning how to spot or mediate third force, which is present in every situation but generally hidden.

Have you ever experienced this in your own life? Faced with a dilemma, do you debate whether you should do this or that? A or B? We are, it seems, binary beings living in a dualistic culture. Wrestling with difficult situations, feeling pressed to make a decision, we often feel that neither of the two alternatives really solves the problem at hand. We would be wise to wait and prayerfully seek the third way, that is so often hidden from view. And the key is that the energy for the reconciling way forward is embedded in the situation at hand; it's there but we can't at first see it.

In both of the parables we heard this morning, Jesus teaches about finding the third way, a way that often seems like death and renewal, suffering and redemption. First, the seed that falls to the ground must die

and open in moist earth. But—and all gardeners among us know it in spades this year—without the sun it cannot sprout to new life.

When the adulterous woman is brought to Jesus and citing Levitical law, the religious authorities question whether or not they should stone her, Jesus reframes the situation entirely. It is no longer a question of choosing between two alternatives: stoning her to death or letting her go. Jesus simply says, “Let those among you who are without sin, cast the first stone.” And the square where they are standing is suddenly awash with humility and compassion as silently the accusers walk away.

Cynthia Bourgeault uses an image of a sailboat that I find particularly helpful. Imagine a sailboat on the water with the sail up. When the wind comes, as you know, the boat does not move forward, it flips around into the wind and stops. What we don’t recognize at first is that there is a keel, a rudder and a sailor who directs the forward movement of the boat.

Remembering our crosses, I suggest another way to see it. Envision the horizontal plane of the boat on the water as our elemental engagement with the revealed and incarnated creation, with Jesus beside us. The vertical sail with it’s keel below we see as our aspiring, longing and reaching for God. We can sit in our boats, sailors all, sensing and reflecting for a long time, contemplating our nautical navels. But we won’t get very far without the wind. Ah, the Holy Spirit that stirs and impels forward. It is through the coming together of these three aspects of our lives with God that we live fully in the Trinity.

God for us, we call you Father.

God alongside us, we call you Jesus.

God within us, we call you Holy Spirit.

Finally, here is the third chapter heading –because of course we’re doing things in three today—the was this works in your life.

I heard a story recently that I'd like to share with you. A friend of mine went to MacDonald's for lunch last week. As she pulled into a parking place, she saw a man sitting outside the door with a cardboard sign asking for money. Turning off the ignition, she sat and began the internal debate that we all so often have: should she give him money or not? Weighing the alternatives, caught between the pros and cons, and still not having been able to discern the right path, she headed towards the door behind another woman who did actually stop to talk with the man.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I don't have any cash on me today but would you like to join me for lunch?" As my friend ate her lunch, she felt herself filled and warmed by the sight of the two strangers together at table.

That's what it feels like when we step inside the Trinity, embrace the elemental, blessed incarnation of our lives with Jesus by our sides, give thanks to God for everything and feel the hidden and holy spirit deep within us, calling us to nothing less than love.

Grace and Peace.