

Together

Genesis 18:1-8

2 Corinthians 13:5-13

Matthew 28:18-20

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Trinity Sunday

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Sixteen years ago, a book written by a Canadian Author named William P. Young suddenly burst onto the scene as a best seller. The Shack is a story about a man named Mackenzie Philips who suffers the tremendous loss of his young daughter Missy, who is abducted and brutally murdered while on a family camping trip. For four years Mackenzie, or Mack, exists as a shadow person, living all the if-only, hollow, empty, not really present with his family, angry with God and gripped by his Great Sadness.

Then one day Mack receives a strange note from God – who signs it Papa – asking him to come spend a weekend back at the abandoned shack deep in the Oregon wilderness where Missy was last seen, where her bloodied dress had been found. Arriving there in winter, which suddenly blooms into spring, he meets God, portrayed as three individuals. God the Father is a big black woman named Papa who loves to cook. God the Son Jesus is a Middle Eastern laborer dressed in jeans, plaid shirt and a tool belt. God the Holy Spirit is named Sarayu, an Asian woman who loves to garden and seems to fade in and out of visibility, clearly the least controllable or predictable one.

Most of the book consists of Mack's weekend visit with these persons as they help him come to grips with the tragedy of his daughter's death and the way God is still lovingly at work in Mack's life and in this world. Through his interaction with these three, Mack comes to a remarkable vision of God's presence in the midst of suffering and an understanding of forgiveness that does not deny, but rather overcomes evil.

While some criticized the book as an irreverent casual treatment of the classic Trinitarian doctrine, the foundational doctrine of Christianity, most found it to be a vivid lively re-presentation of the God we experience as three in one and one in three. Author of The Message, Eugene Peterson said of it, "This book has the potential to do for our generation what John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress did for his. It's that good!"

Up to that point the Trinity had been largely yawned over as a dry dusty doctrine, even though major theologians from Karl Barth to Karl Rahner, John Calvin too, have found the Trinity to be the essential bones or skeleton around and upon which our Christian faith is built. Consider the Trinitarian structure of the Apostles and Nicene Creeds. But is it practical to the average person?

The Shack brought the ancient doctrine home to a new generation making vivid that essentially the Trinity is not about math but about relationship. God is not only in relationship with us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but God is in living, pulsating, dancing relationship within

the Divine Being. The Trinity is alive and moving. The Trinity is how God holds together, and holds us together.

Every essential thing we do in the Church is done in the name of the Trinity. We open and close our worship services, baptize our children, declare our professions of faith, make our marriage vows, profess our officer ordination and installation vows, and bury our dead, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. One committal prayer puts it like this:

“Depart O Christian Soul, in peace, in the name of God the Creator who formed you;
in the name of Jesus Christ who redeemed you,
in the name of the Holy Spirit, the comforter who sanctifies you.”ⁱ

All our really big prayers, like the Great Thanksgiving in today’s holy communion liturgy, end something like this:

“Through Christ, with Christ, in Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor are yours, almighty Father, now and forever. Amen.”

You see, the Trinity is all about relationship. “In the beginning was the relationship.” Trinitarian math is impossible. Analogies of ice, water, and steam as solid, liquid and gas may be helpful, but are inadequate. Essentially the Trinity is about relationship, unity and harmony; God together, us together, like atoms, protons and neutrons, electrons all intertwined moving with God and one another.

As C.S. Lewis writes,

“In Christianity God is not an impersonal thing nor a static thing – not even just one person – but a dynamic pulsating, activity, a life, a kind of drama, almost, if you will not think me irreverent, a kind of dance... The pattern of this three-personal life... is the great foundation of energy and beauty spurting up at the very center of reality.”ⁱⁱ

We must approach the Trinity not as an impossible to solve math problem, but as a holy mystery in which we live and move and have our being, a holy mystery which gets and holds us! As Richard Rohr notes in his wonderful book, which I highly commend to you, The Divine Dance,

“All theological language is an approximation, offered tentatively in holy awe. That’s the best human language can achieve. We can say, ‘It’s like- it’s similar to... but we can never say, ‘It is....’ Because we are in the realm of beyond, of transcendence, of mystery. And we must – absolutely must – maintain a fundamental humility before the Great Mystery. If we do not, religion always worships itself and its formulations and never God.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The actual word “Trinity”, is not found in the Bible. It comes only in the 3rd century made popular by the theologian Tertullian. But Trinitarian imagery is found throughout the

Bible, beginning with Genesis, where God in the Creation says, “Let **us** make humankind in our image, according to our likeness;”^{iv} Interestingly I noticed for the very first time last week in preparing for you, that in Genesis 1 it is only in relation to God’s creation of man and woman in God’s image, not the creation of the planets, sun, moon, stars, birds, fish, cattle and wild animals of every kind, that this allusion to a Triune God is spoken as “Let us.” The Three-fold God is not always referred to explicitly as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but always there is this sense of God in relationship.

Like in our Lessons today. We find in Genesis 18 the Lord appearing to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. “He looked up and saw three men standing near him.” Who are these? Just strangers passing through? Angels? Or the Triune God? Scholars differ, yet I am inclined to see this as an early allusion to a three-person God. Walter Brueggeman calls it “an unreflective account of a revelatory disclosure.” For note the passage opens saying “The Lord appeared” (as) “three men.” And Abraham calls them, “My lord”. He and Sarah then respond with radical hospitality, preparing a meal for them. “Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.”^v

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus final words, what we call the Great Commission, are uttered to the disciples up on the mountain, as he claims all the authority in heaven and on earth, and commands 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.”^{vi}

We find Paul, in 2 Corinthians 13 concluding his letter to a church where there was dissension and division, which he addresses and admonishes throughout the letter, now, after calling them to examine themselves to see whether they are living in the faith, and doing what is right, saying, “Agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you.” And then Paul concludes with what is the most explicitly Trinitarian benediction in all his writings, what we call the Apostolic Benediction,

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the Communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.” Grace, Love and Fellowship. Let’s look at how those three flows together with our experiencing God as living, active, and relating.

I

First Grace, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.” This reminds us of the great gift of God’s grace which is really unique to Christianity. God comes to us, reveals himself through his grace, the gift of God. God extends himself to us, as Paul writes in Romans, “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” “By grace you are saved.”

Grace comes not to those who are worthy enough to earn it, but to those who are open enough to receive it. Grace comes giving us a sense of awe and wonder. “My God how great Thou art!” In that early pre-figuring, God comes to Abraham there at Mamre in the form of

these three men, and Abraham and Sarah respond, not with fear or hostility, but with welcome and radical hospitality in preparing a meal for them.

What follows is the revelation of grace to them that this old couple in their retirement years are about to have a son. "Their world of barrenness is shattered by a new world of possibility."^{vii} Barrenness will no longer be their lot but they will parent a vast generation as numerous as the stars of the heaven. God graciously initiates what happens again and again in Scripture making possible the impossible. Jesus said, "With man it is impossible, but not with God, for with God all things are possible."^{viii}

First the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

II

Second Love, "the love of God." Love and acceptance are such a vital part of the essential nature of God. "In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us. "God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son." "The greatest of these is love." God loves every one of us. You are greatly loved.

In the famous icon, "The Trinity" by Russian iconographer Anton Rublev that is on the front of the bulletin we see God in these three persons together in loving relationship with all that symbolism described on the back of the bulletin. It has been called "the icon of icons." Note these three persons, are not static, inert, but communicating, eating, loving, vitally alive together. I love the story of that one artist who simply by gazing at the icon in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow became a follower of Jesus, explaining "if that's the nature of God, then I am a believer."^{ix}

Second – the love of God.

Third Communion, "the communion of the Holy Spirit." That is, again, the fellowship, the relationship, the recognition that God who is in communion within God's own self is in communion with us.

In Rublev's icon notice there is a stool of some sort in front of the Oris table is a basin? I think it is a stool upon which we are invited to sit. We are invited to enter in and be seated together at this table with the Triune Lord, enter into intimate communion with this Living One at the heavenly banquet table. At the heart of the Holy Supper we are about to share is the invitation We are each and every one invited - come sit at this Table, commune with this Holy One, dine with this Lord, receive his great costly gift of his sacrifice for our sins in his body and his blood, given in these signs of bread and wine. This is my body. This is my blood. What's at the heart of this meal? William Sloan Coffin says this,

"Concerning communion services, there will always be talk of transubstantiation and consubstantiation. But don't look for Christ in the nouns; find him rather in the verbs: 'this is my body *broken*... this is my blood *shed*.'"^x

So, the Trinity, our foundational doctrine in which we live and die and live again, the Trinity, with which Christianity either stands or falls, the Trinity marked by **Grace, Love, Communion** opens us to the Dancing God, the Living God, the Vibrant God, the God who is always and forever here for us and here with us.

So OK, let's bring down to Earth this heady subject today, with a really earthy illustration. This year I have once again planted some tomatoes. The last few years my tomatoes have not done well. So, this year I took time to read up on these little delectable. I got my soil tested by Auburn University's soil testing service, improved my soil with the recommended top soil, manure, fertilizers, and Harold Deason brought me something called "Slag" which I added. Then I planted my little seedlings on Good Friday like they say you are supposed to. I've been watering the plants regularly. So far so good. I now have plants that are five feet tall and popping out with green fruit. So far, so good.

Well, over Memorial Day weekend we were away from the house with children and grandchildren and I had neglected to water them before leaving for four days. Upon arriving home early Tuesday morning I found my tomato plants in dismal condition, the leaves were wilting, the stems slumped over just hanging there limply on the wire basket supports.

I imagined these tomatoes were over and done and I might as well pull them out. Instead I rushed to the hose early Tuesday morning and soaked them really well. When I got home Tuesday night, the plants were again standing tall and green, leaves full, stems strong.

Let's liken that to the Trinity. Like the plants, remove any of the essential ingredients, soil, light, water and the plants will die. Remove any of the three persons of the Godhead- Father, Son, or Holy Spirit, and we have an incomplete non-relating God. Together the three are powerful and personal. Together they will sustain us come what may. Triangles you know are the strongest shape there is. Virtually nothing can destroy them.

"Because the Spirit interceded for us nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord."

May we be so intertwined in this God of grace, love and communion confident that the God of love and peace is with us, and may we greet one another with a holy kiss.

"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with all of you. "

Amen.

ⁱ PCUSA Book of Common Worship, "Prayers at the time of death"

ⁱⁱ C.S. Lewis, The Last Battle, p.171, 184

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- iii Richard Rohr, The Divine Dance – The Trinity and Your Transformation, p. 27
- iv Genesis 1:26
- v Genesis 18:8
- vi Matthew 28:19
- vii Walter Brueggemann, Genesis- Interpretation Commentary, p. 154
- viii Matthew 19:26
- ix Richard Rohr, The Divine Dance – The Trinity and Your Transformation
- x William Sloan Coffin, The Collected Sermons – Riverside Sermons – volume 1, p.469