

“Trinities”

June 3, 2007

John 16:12-14

2 Corinthians 13:11-14

Ten years ago, Chey and I were planning a weekend in Provincetown, Massachusetts. We found a bed and breakfast place that sounded about right, so we made our reservations. I don't remember how it came up, but somehow in the process we learned that the three people who owned it were ... well, not a couple and another person, but a triple. They were business partners, but they were also family partners. Not married, of course, but committed to one another. So I thought of them as a triple, even as a trinity.

At the time, I was in my mid-thirties and had certainly been exposed to a variety of ways that people make family with one another. I'd lived in San Francisco and the East Bay and in Santa Fe, so I was no longer the easily-shocked small town Southerner I once was. But, still, the idea of a three-partner relationship was new to me, so I told a couple of my colleagues about it. I'll never forget what one of them said in response. She listened to me, thought a little while, and then said, “You know, maybe that's not such a bad idea. If there are three of you instead of two, maybe it would take the edge off the relationship. If you're tired of your husband and he wants attention, you can just send him to the other spouse.”

I wasn't exactly encouraged by what her comments seemed to suggest about her own marriage, but I did think she might have a point. There's something about three that can seem more balanced, more stable, even stronger than two. Maybe not in the context of three people who are quasi-married to one another – I find being married to only one person sufficiently challenging and rewarding, thank you very much! – but maybe it's a good idea in a more general sense. You can't have a two-legged chair, unless the legs are each 10 inches square or 10 inches in diameter. Cameras are put on tripods, not bipods. Bicycles can fall over, but tricycles are much more likely to stay upright.

So I come to this Sunday, which is Trinity Sunday, and to the Biblical and traditional Christian descriptions of God as Father (or Creator), Son (or Christ), and Holy Spirit with respect for the underlying richness and strength in something that is threefold. I can feel held, nourished, and protected by a triune God of simultaneous diversity and unity. In part because I hope that you, too, experience the embrace, nurturance, and protection of God, I often include in the benediction on Sunday mornings, “May the love of God, the grace of Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you, now and always.”

But even though the idea of a trinitarian or triune God speaks to both my head and my heart, I found myself wondering this past week, “So what?” What difference does it make? Is this just some abstract theological doctrine, or does it offer something that we need, something that the world needs? By proclaiming God as a unified diversity of 3 – Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit – what does Christianity bring to the table? What does Christianity bring to the table around which the world's religions and the world's needs are gathered? Does the Trinity bring any healing, any inspiration, any *hope* to the places and the people where it's needed?

Does it? Oh, my heavens, yes.

In proclaiming, testifying, and trying to live the testimony that the one God is Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit, Christians bring the simple truth that, at the heart of the cosmos, at the root of all that is, at the source of our very lives ... there is *relationship*. Christians bring the good – and challenging – news that, in God, in what Paul Tillich called the very ground of our being, there is mutual, interdependent, non-hierarchical, loving relationship. In and to a world of gross inequality, a world of destroyed and damaged relationships, and a world of fear and hatred for “the Other,” Christians dare to proclaim that there truly is no “Other;” Christians dare to proclaim that God seeks to *heal* relationships by *being* relationship; and Christians dare to proclaim that inequality and injustice are human creations, not God’s creation or intention.

Those of us who are Christian are called to bring the Gospel, the Good News, to a fractured and violent world. And the Good News of the Trinity, the bizarre and baffling notion that God is simultaneously 3 and 1, is that the world of just and peaceful relationships, the world of true *Shalom*, is not something we have to *create*. It is, instead, something that is there for us to *discover*. It is there for us to *uncover*, because loving, mutual, interrelationship is already there, at the heart of creation, at the center of the universe, in the very essence of God.

The Good News of the Trinity is that the vision we sing in the hymn “O for a World” – “O for a world where everyone respects each other’s ways, where love is lived and all is done with justice and with praise” – is not some pie-in-the-sky fantasy. It is not some impossible dream. It is not some ridiculous idea cooked up by a bunch of armchair liberals with too much time on their hands. The Good News is that this vision is actually not a vision, but is instead what already *is*. It is what already exists in the very heart of God.

We are not called to do the hard – and, I would add, impossible – work of building a world of peace, justice, and compassion from the ground up. We are called instead to do the work of letting it break into our own lives and into the life of all creation. We are called, perhaps more than anything else, to get out of the way, to let go of fear and greed, self-loathing and self-aggrandizement, so that we allow God to be God in our lives. We are called to let God be a creating, loving, and sustaining Trinity in us and through us.

If, as Christianity proclaims, God is, in God’s very essence, a mutually-sustaining relationship of diversity and unity and if, as both Christianity and Judaism proclaim, we are made in God’s image, then you and I can become who we truly are and who we are meant to be only if we risk living as God lives. We can be who we genuinely are as people of God only if we risk embracing the truth that we are inextricably and inescapably bound in relationship with every other person and every other part of creation. God *is* relationship. When we deny our own relatedness to all of God’s creation, we deny God’s love and claim on us. When we embrace and surrender to that relatedness, we participate in the holy, healing love that is the very heart of the universe.

But let’s be honest, here. What I’m talking about is very risky. It’s risky because all of us are a combination of wholeness and brokenness. The people with whom we are in inescapable relationship are capable of inflicting great harm. The people to whom we are related can be verbally and sexually abusive parents, physically abusive spouses and partners, dishonest and manipulative friends and co-workers, desperate and lost drug

addicts and alcoholics. And, of course, *we* can be those parents, spouses, partners, friends, co-workers, drug addicts, and alcoholics.

Being in relationship carries great risks, and all too often the risks become realities. So I'm not standing before you this morning saying that any of us should surrender to an abusive, destructive relationship. I'm not saying that God intends for any of us to be doormats. Recognizing and honoring that we are all in relationship with all that is does not require us to allow someone else's inability to honor that reality to wreak havoc in our own lives and souls.

What I am saying, though, is that, like it or not, our relationship with all of creation is inescapable. The distance we may need from an abuser and the boundaries we may need when dealing with someone who is bent on destroying that relationship do not change the fact that we *remain* in relationship. We may think it's possible to cut ourselves off from those who have hurt us in the past and from those we're afraid will hurt us in the future, but the truth that Christianity brings to the table is that the very nature of God, the very nature of the cosmos is relationship. The very nature of our humanity rests on interdependent, loving, and sustaining relationship. Our lives rest on risky, challenging, healing, surprising relationship.

A woman known as Granny D. tells a story of risking relationship, a story in which the risk and the blessing of our relatedness are clear as can be. In 1999, at the age of 89, Granny D. decided to walk across the country to demonstrate her concern about campaign finance reform. She started on the West Coast and walked 10 miles a day for over a year. Several years later, my friend Zan heard Granny D. speak, and Zan passed along this story to me.

Somewhere in the middle of the country, as Granny D. made her way from the Pacific Ocean to Washington, D.C., she was walking alone, as she often did, on a state highway. Although her pledge was to walk across the country, she did accept rides from time to time. (If you ask me, at 89, she had *earned* that privilege.) And so on that particular day, when a young man in a pickup truck slowed down and asked her if she would like a ride, she accepted.

As soon as she got into the truck, she sensed that this young man intended her harm, perhaps great harm. As he pressed the gas pedal and the truck began moving again, Granny D. took a deep breath and simply said, "Oh, thank you. The world can be a dangerous place sometimes, you know. And now that I'm safe here with you, I can relax and maybe even get some sleep." With that, she put her head back and closed her eyes.

The man kept driving. At the end of the afternoon, Granny D. stirred and told him that this was as far as she should ride, because she really was trying to get across the country almost entirely on foot. He stopped the truck, and she got out. She found a place to stay for the night, and after having something to eat and taking care of a few other personal needs, she slept.

The next morning, when she was ready to continue her journey on foot, that young man was there, in his pickup truck. For the next several days, he followed her as she continued her walk. When she stopped to rest, he would stop the truck, and they would talk. Finally, he told her he couldn't protect her any longer because he needed to head in a different direction ... and then he talked about the day he had picked her up. He *had* intended to rob her, maybe even to kill her. He'd robbed people before, and she

looked like an easy target. But then, he told her, when she thanked him and trusted him as she settled into her seat, something came over him, and all he then wanted to do was to make sure she was safe. He couldn't explain it, he didn't understand it, but somehow he had become a different man in that moment.

In that moment, Granny D. chose to trust the bonds of relationship that originate in God and that hold all of us in a great tapestry of grace. It was a risky choice. She could have lost her possessions and her life. But she chose to trust the God of unending relationship, the God who was with her and the young man in that truck.

Granny D.'s story takes me back to my colleague ten years ago, thinking that a relationship with two partners instead of one might be a good idea. I'm still not sure about the wisdom of that particular family structure, but I do think that Granny D. understood that she and that young man were not simply two people alone that afternoon. She understood that triune God of relationship was there with them, forming another trinity with her and the young man. She understood that God was, in the words of my former colleague, "taking the edge off" between those two people. In that moment, she chose to trust that the God of divine relationship would shape the relationship between her and a stranger and so transform that moment of danger into a moment of blessing.

That, my beloved friends, is the simple yet daunting task that the Trinitarian God places before each one of us: trust the fullness of God, no matter what the risk, and receive the gift of grace abundant.

For that invitation and so much more, thanks be to God. Amen.

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